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Reflections concerning the causes of liberty and social oppression

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"With regard to human affairs,
not to laugh, not to cry,
not to become indignant,
but to understand."
Spinoza

"The being gifted with reason can make every obstacle serve as material for his work, and turn it to account."
Marcus Aurelius

Introduction

The present period is one of those when everything that seems normally to constitute a reason for living dwindles away, when one must, on pain of sinking into confusion or apathy, call everything in question again. That the triumph of authoritarian and nationalist movements should blast almost everywhere the hopes that well-meaning people had placed in democracy and in pacifism is only a part of the evil from which we are suffering; it is far deeper and far more widespread. One may well ask oneself if there exists a single sphere of public or private life where the very spring-heads of activity and of hope have not been poisoned by the conditions under which we live. Work is no longer done with the proud consciousness that one is being useful, but with the humiliating and agonizing feeling of enjoying a privilege bestowed by a temporary stroke of fortune, a privilege from which one excludes several human beings by the mere fact that one enjoys, in short, a job. The leaders of industry themselves have lost that naïve belief in unlimited economic progress which made them imagine that they had a mission. Technical progress seems to have gone bankrupt, since instead of happiness it has only brought the masses that physical and moral wretchedness in which we see them floundering; moreover, technical innovations are now banned everywhere, or very nearly so, except in industries connected with war. As for scientific progress, it is difficult to see what can be the use of piling up still more knowledge on to a heap already much too vast to be able to be em-

braced by the minds even of specialists; and experience has shown that our forefathers were mistaken in believing in the spread of enlightenment, since all that can be revealed to the masses is a miserable caricature of modern scientific culture, a caricature which, far from forming their judgment, accustoms them to be credulous. Art itself suffers the backlash of the general confusion, which partly deprives it of its public, and by that very fact impairs inspiration. Finally, family life has become nothing but anxiety, now that society is closed to the young. The very generation for whom a feverish expectation of the future is the whole of life, vegetates, all over the world, with the feeling that it has no future, that there is no room for it in our world. But if this evil is felt more sharply by youth, it remains common to the whole of humanity today. We are living through a period bereft of a future. Waiting for that which is to come is no longer a matter of hope, but of anguish.

However, ever since 1789, there has been one magic word which contains within itself all imaginable futures, and is never so full of hope as in desperate situations—that word is revolution. That is why, for some time now, we have often been hearing it uttered. We ought, so it seems, to be in a period of full revolution; but in fact everything goes on as if the revolutionary movement were falling into decay with the very system it aspires to destroy. For more than a century, each new generation of revolutionaries has, in turn, placed its hopes in an impending revolution; today, these hopes have lost everything which was able to serve them as buttresses. Neither in the régime that emerged from the October Revolution, nor in the two Internationals, nor in the independent socialist or communist parties, nor in the trade unions, nor in the anarchist organizations, nor in the small youth groups that have

sprung up in such profusion in recent times, can one find anything vigorous, healthy or pure; for a long time now the working class has shown no sign of that spontaneity on which Rosa Luxemburg counted, and which, moreover, has never manifested itself without being promptly drowned in blood; the middle classes are only attracted by revolution when it is conjured up for demagogic purposes by apprentice dictators. It is often said that the situation is objectively revolutionary, and that all that is lacking is the "subjective factor"; as if the complete absence of that very force which alone could transform the system were not an objective characteristic of the present situation, whose origins must be sought in the structure of our society! That is why the first duty the present period imposes on us is to have enough intellectual courage to ask ourselves if the term "revolution" is anything else but a name, if it has any precise content, if it is not simply one of the numerous lies produced by the capitalist system in its rise to power which the present crisis is doing us the service of dissipating. This question seems impious, in view of all the pure and noble human beings who have sacrificed everything, their life included, in the service of this word. But only priests can claim to measure the value of an idea by the amount of blood it has caused to be shed. Who knows whether the revolutionaries have not shed their blood as vainly as those Greeks and Trojans of the poet, who, cheated by a false semblance, fought each other for ten years around the shade of Helen?

Critique of Marxism

Up to now all those who have experienced the need to buttress their revolutionary feelings with precise concepts have found or thought they found these concepts in Marx. It is accepted once and for all that Marx, thanks to his general theory of history and to his analysis of bourgeois society, demonstrated the ineluctable necessity of an early upheaval, in which the oppression we suffer under capitalism would be abolished; and indeed, by dint of being persuaded of the fact, we generally dispense with examining. the demonstration more closely. "Scientific socialism" has attained the status of a dogma, exactly in the same way as have all the results obtained by modern science, results in which each one thinks it is his duty to believe, without ever dreaming of enquiring into the method employed. As far as Marx is concerned, if one tries really to grasp his demonstration intellectually, one at once perceives that it contains very many more difficulties than the advocates of "scientific socialism" lead one to suppose.

Actually, Marx gives a first-rate account of the mechanism of capitalist oppression; but so good is it that one finds it hard to visualize how this mechanism could cease to function. As a rule, it is only the economic aspect of this oppression that holds our attention, that is to say the extortion of surplus value; and, if we confine ourselves to this point of view, it is certainly easy to explain to the masses that this extortion is bound up with competition, which latter is in turn bound up with private property, and

that the day when property becomes collective all will be well. Nevertheless, even within the limits of this apparently simple reasoning, a thousand difficulties present themselves on careful examination. For Marx showed clearly that the true reason for the exploitation of the workers is not any desire on the part of the capitalists to enjoy and consume, but the need to expand the undertaking as rapidly as possible so as to make it more powerful than its rivals. Now not only a business undertaking, but any sort of working collectivity, no matter what it may be, has to exercise the maximum restraint on the consumption of its members so as to devote as much time as possible to forging weapons for use against rival collectivities; so that as long as there is, on the surface of the globe, a struggle for power, and as long as the decisive factor in victory is industrial production, the workers will be exploited. As a matter of fact, what Marx assumed, without, however, proving it, was that every kind of struggle for power will disappear on the day socialism is established in all industrial countries; the only trouble is that, as Marx himself recognized, revolution cannot take place everywhere at once; and when it does take place in one country, it does not for that country do away with the need for exploiting and oppressing the mass of workers, but on the contrary accentuates the need, lest it be found weaker than the other nations. The history of the Russian Revolution furnishes a painful illustration of this.

If we consider other aspects of capitalist oppression, other still more formidable difficulties appear, or rather the same difficulty under a more glaring light. The power which the bourgeoisie has to exploit and oppress the workers lies at the very foundations of our social life, and cannot be destroyed by any political and juridical transformation. This power consists in the first

place and essentially in the modern system of production itself, that is to say big industry. Pungent dicta abound in Marx's writings on this subject of living labour being enslaved to dead labour, "the reversal of the relationship between subject and object", "the subordination of the worker to the material conditions of work". "In the factory", he writes in Capital, "there exists a mechanism independent of the workers, which incorporates them as living cogs. . . . The separation of the spiritual forces that play a part in production from manual labour, and the transformation of the former into power exercised by capital over labour, attain their fulfilment in big industry founded on mechanization. The detail of the individual destiny of the machine-worker fades into insignificance before the science, the tremendous natural forces and the collective labour which are incorporated in the machines as a whole and constitute with them the employer's power." Thus the worker's complete subordination to the undertaking and to those who run it is founded on the factory organization and not on the system of property. Similarly, "the separation of the spiritual forces that play a part in production from manual labour", or, according to another formula, "the degrading division of labour into manual and intellectual labour", is the very foundation of our culture, which is a culture of specialists. Science is a monopoly, not because public education is badly organized, but by its very nature; non-scientists have access only to the results, not to the methods, that is to say they can only believe, not assimilate. "Scientific socialism" has itself remained the monopoly of a select few, and the "intellectuals" possess, unfortunately, the same privileges in the working-class movement as they do in bourgeois society. And the same applies, furthermore, on the political plane.

Marx had clearly perceived that State oppression is founded on the existence of organs of government that are permanent and distinct from the population, namely, the bureaucratic, military and police machines; but these permanent organs are the inevitable result of the radical distinction existing, in fact, between the managerial and executive functions. In this respect again, the working-class movement reproduces in full the vices of bourgeois society. At all levels we are brought up against the same obstacle. The whole of our civilization is founded on specialization, which implies the enslavement of those who execute to those who co-ordinate; and on such a basis one can only organize and perfect oppression, not lighten it. Far from capitalist society having developed within itself the material conditions for a régime of liberty and equality, the establishment of such a régime presupposes a preliminary transformation in the realm of production and that of culture.

We can only understand how Marx and his disciples could still believe in the possibility of a real democracy based on our present civilization if we take into account their theory of the development of productive forces. It is well known that, in Marx's eyes, this development constitutes, in the last analysis, the true motive power of history, and that it is practically unlimited. Every social system, every dominant class has the "task", the "historic mission", of carrying the productive forces to an ever higher level, until the day when all further progress is arrested by the social cadres; at that moment the productive forces rebel, break up these cadres, and a new class takes over power. The recognition of the fact that the capitalist system grinds down millions of men only enables one to condemn it morally; what constitutes the historic condemnation of the system is the fact

that, after having made productive progress possible, it is now an obstacle in its way. The essential task of revolutions consists in the emancipation not of men but of productive forces. As a matter of fact, it is clear that, as soon as these have reached a level of development high enough for production to be carried out at the cost of little effort, the two tasks coincide; and Marx assumed that such was the case in our time. It was this assumption that enabled him to establish a harmony, indispensable to his moral tranquillity, between his idealistic aspirations and his materialistic conception of history. In his view, modern technique, once freed from capitalist forms of economy, can give men, here and now, sufficient leisure to enable them to develop their faculties harmoniously, and consequently bring about the disappearance, to a certain extent, of the degrading specialization created by capitalism; and above all the further development of technique must lighten more and more, day by day, the burden of material necessity, and as an immediate consequence that of social constraint, until humanity reaches at last a truly paradisal state in which the most abundant production would be at the cost of a trifling expenditure of effort and the ancient curse of work would be lifted; in short, in which the happiness of Adam and Eve before the fall would be regained.

One can understand very well, starting from this conception, the attitude of the Bolsheviks, and why all of them, including Trotsky, treat democratic ideas with supreme disdain. They have found themselves powerless to bring about the workers' democracy foreshadowed by Marx; but such a minor detail does not worry them, convinced as they are, on the one hand, that all attempts at social action which do not consist of developing productive forces are doomed to failure, on the other

hand, that all progress in productive forces causes humanity to advance along the road leading to emancipation, even if it is at the cost of a temporary oppression. It is not surprising that, backed up by such moral certainty as this, they have astonished the world by their strength.

It is seldom, however, that comforting beliefs are at the same time rational. Before even examining the Marxist conception of productive forces, one is struck by the mythological character it presents in all socialist literature, where it is assumed as a postulate. Marx never explains why productive forces should tend to increase; by accepting without proof this mysterious tendency, he allies himself not with Darwin, as he liked to think, but with Lamarck, who in similar fashion founded his biological system on an inexplicable tendency of living creatures to adapt themselves. In the same way, why is it that, when social institutions are in opposition to the development of productive forces, victory should necessarily belong beforehand to the latter rather than the former? Marx evidently does not assume that men consciously transform their social conditions in order to improve their economic conditions; he knows perfectly well that up to the present social transformations have never been accompanied by any clear realization of their real long-term consequences; he therefore implicitly assumes that productive forces possess a secret virtue enabling them to overcome obstacles. Finally, why does he assert without demonstration, and as a self-evident truth, that the productive forces are capable of unlimited development?

The whole of this doctrine, on which the Marxist conception of revolution entirely rests, is absolutely devoid of any scien-

tific basis. In order to understand it, we must remember the Hegelian origins of Marxist thought. Hegel believed in a hidden mind at work in the universe, and that the history of the world is simply the history of this world mind, which, as in the case of everything spiritual, tends indefinitely towards perfection. Marx claimed to "put back on its feet" the Hegelian dialectic, which he accused of being "upside down", by substituting matter for mind as the motive power of history; but by an extraordinary paradox, he conceived history, starting from this rectification, as though he attributed to matter what is the very essence of mind—an unceasing aspiration towards the best. In this he was profoundly in keeping, moreover, with the general current of capitalist thought; to transfer the principle of progress from mind to things is to give a philosophical expression to that "reversal of the relationship between subject and object" in which Marx discerned the very essence of capitalism. The rise of big industry made of productive forces the divinity of a kind of religion whose influence Marx came under, despite himself, when formulating his conception of history. The term religion may seem surprising in connection with Marx; but to believe that our will coincides with a mysterious will which is at work in the universe and helps us to conquer is to think religiously, to believe in Providence. Besides, Marx's vocabulary itself testifies to this since it contains quasi-mystical expressions such as "the historic mission of the proletariat".

This religion of productive forces, in whose name generations of industrial employers have ground down the labouring masses without the slightest qualm, also constitutes a factor making for oppression within the socialist movement. All religions make man into a mere instrument of Providence, and

socialism, too, puts men at the service of historical progress, that is to say of productive progress. That is why, whatever may be the insult inflicted on Marx's memory by the cult which the Russian oppressors of our time entertain for him, it is not altogether undeserved. Marx, it is true, never had any other motive except a generous yearning after liberty and equality; but this yearning, once separated from the materialistic religion with which it was merged in his mind, no longer belongs to anything except what Marx contemptuously called utopian socialism. If Marx's writings contained nothing more valuable than this, they might without loss be forgotten, at any rate except for his economic analyses.

But such is not the case; we find in Marx a different conception from that Hegelian doctrine turned inside out, namely, a materialism which no longer has anything religious about it and forms not a doctrine but a method of understanding and of action. It is no uncommon thing to fi nd thus in quite great minds two distinct and even incompatible conceptions mingling together under cover of the inevitable looseness of language; absorbed as they are in formulating new ideas, such minds have not the time to make a critical examination of what they have discovered. Marx's truly great idea is that in human society as well as in nature nothing takes place otherwise than through material transformations. "Men make their own history, but within certain fixed conditions." To desire is nothing; we have got to know the material conditions which determine our possibilities of action; and in the social sphere these conditions are defined by the way in which man obeys material necessities in supplying his own needs, in other words, by the method of production. A methodical improvement in social organization pre-

supposes a detailed study of the method of production, in order to try to find out on the one hand what we may expect from it, in the immediate or distant future, from the point of view of output, and on the other hand what forms of social and cultural organization are compatible with it, and, finally, how it may itself be transformed. Only irresponsible human beings can neglect such a study and yet claim the right to domineer over society; and, unfortunately, such is the case everywhere, as much in revolutionary circles as among the ruling classes. The materialistic method—that instrument which Marx bequeathed us—is an untried instrument; no Marxist has ever really used it, beginning with Marx himself. The only really valuable idea to be found in Marx's writings is also the only one that has been completely neglected. It is not surprising that the social movements springing from Marx have failed.

The first question to consider is that concerning output. Are there any reasons for supposing that modern technique, at its present level, is capable—always supposing a fair distribution—of guaranteeing to everyone sufficient welfare and leisure so that the development of the individual may cease to be hampered by modern working conditions? It seems that on this subject there are many illusions, purposely kept alive by demagogic interests. It is not profits which have to be calculated; those of them that are reinvested in production would for the most part be taken away from the workers under any system. We should have to be able to calculate the total amount of labour that could be dispensed with at the cost of a transformation of the property system. Even that would not solve the problem; we must bear in mind the labour involved in the complete reorganization of the productive machine, a reorganization necessary for production

to be adapted to its new end, namely, the welfare of the masses; we must not forget that the manufacture of armaments would not be abandoned before the capitalist system had been everywhere destroyed; above all, we must provide for the fact that the abolition of individual profit, while causing certain forms of waste to disappear, would at the same time necessarily create others. It is impossible, of course, to make exact calculations; but they are not indispensable for discerning that the abolition of private property would be far from sufficient in itself to prevent work in the mines and in the factories from continuing to weigh as a servitude on those who are subjected to it.

But if the present state of technique is insufficient to liberate the workers, is there at any rate a reasonable hope that an unlimited development lies before it, which would imply an unlimited increase in productivity? This is what everybody assumes, both among capitalists and socialists, without the smallest preliminary study of the question; it is enough that the productivity of human effort should have increased in an unheard of manner for the last three centuries for it to be expected that this increase will continue at the same rate. Our so-called scientific culture has given us this fatal habit of generalizing, of arbitrarily extrapolating, instead of studying the conditions of a given phenomenon and the limits implied by them; and Marx, whose dialectical method should have saved him from such an error, fell into it on this point just like other people.

The problem is fundamental, and of a kind to determine all our future prospects; it must be formulated with the utmost precision. To this end, the first thing is to know in what technical progress consists, what factors play a part in it, and to examine

each factor separately; for we mix up under the name of technical progress entirely different procedures that offer different possibilities of development. The first procedure that offers itself to man for producing more with less effort is the utilization of natural sources of energy; and it is true, in a sense, that it is impossible to assign a precise limit to the benefits of this procedure, because we do not know what new sources of energy we shall one day be able to use; but this does not mean to say that there can be prospects of unlimited progress in this direction, nor that progress in it is, generally speaking, assured. For nature does not give us this energy, whatever may be the form in which it offers itself—animal power, coal or petroleum; we have to wrest it from her and transform it through our labour so as to adapt it to our own ends. Now, this labour does not necessarily become less as time goes on; at present the very opposite is happening to us, since the extraction of coal and petroleum becomes continually and automatically less profitable and more costly. What is more, the deposits at present known are destined to become exhausted at the end of a relatively short time. Perhaps new deposits will be found; but prospecting, the development of new workings, some of which will doubtless fail to pay—all that will be costly; furthermore, we do not know how many unknown deposits there are in general, and in any case their number will not be unlimited. We may also—and no doubt some day we are bound to—discover new sources of energy; but there is nothing to guarantee that their utilization will call for less labour than the utilization of coal or heavy oils; the opposite is just as possible. It may even happen, at the worst, that the utilization of a natural source of energy involves more labour than the human expenditure of energy one is seeking to replace. In this field it is chance which

decides; for the discovery of a new and easily accessible source of energy or of an economic transformation process for a known source of energy is not one of those things one is sure of reaching on a basis of thinking methodically and spending the necessary time thereon.

We deceive ourselves in this matter because we are in the habit of considering the development of science from outside and as a whole; we do not realize that if certain scientific results depend entirely on the good use the scientist makes of his reasoning faculties, others are the result of lucky finds. This is so in the case of the utilization of the forces of nature. There is not the least doubt that every source of energy is transformable; but the scientist is no more certain of coming across something economically advantageous in the course of his researches than is the explorer of arriving at a fertile territory. We can find an instructive example of this in the famous experiments connected with the thermic energy of the seas, about which there has been so much—and such useless—excitement. Now, as soon as chance enters in, the idea of continuous progress is no longer applicable. Consequently, to hope that the development of science will one day bring about, in some sort of automatic way, the discovery of a source of energy which would be almost immediately utilizable for all human needs, is simply daydreaming. One cannot prove that it is impossible; and, strictly speaking, it is possible, too, that one fine day some sudden change in the astronomical order may give to vast expanses of the earth's surface the bewitching climate that enables, so it is said, certain primitive tribes to live without working; but possibilities of this description must never be taken into account. On the whole, it would not be reasonable to try to determine here

and now what the future holds in store for the human race in this field.

Apart from this, there exists only one other resource making it possible to diminish the total sum of human effort, namely, what we may call, to use a modern expression, the rationalization of labour. Two aspects of it may be distinguished; one which concerns the relationship between simultaneous efforts, the other that between successive efforts; in both cases progress resides in increasing the productivity of the efforts by the way in which these are combined. It is clear that in this field one can, strictly speaking, leave chance out of account, and that here the notion of progress has a meaning; the question is to know whether this progress is unlimited, and, if not, whether we are still a long way from the limit.

As far as what may be termed the rationalization of labour in space is concerned, the economic factors are the concentration, division and co-ordination of labour. The concentration of labour implies the reduction of all kinds of expenses that may be included all together under the heading of overheads, amongst them those relating to premises, transport, sometimes plant. As for the division of labour, that has far more astonishing results. Sometimes it makes it possible to reach a considerable speed in the execution of work which individual workers by themselves could accomplish as well, but much more slowly, and that because each would have to make on his own account the effort of co-ordination which the organization of labour enables one man to assume on behalf of several others. Adam Smith's famous analysis with regard to the manufacture of pins is an example of this. At other times—and this is what matters

most—division and co-ordination of effort make possible gigantic works which would be infinitely beyond the scope of a single man. We must also bear in mind the savings which regional specialization makes possible in the matter of transportation of energy and of raw materials, and doubtless many others besides, which it would take too long to investigate. At all events, as soon as we cast a look at the present system of production, it seems fairly obvious not only that these labour-saving factors contain within themselves a limit beyond which they become factors of expenditure, but furthermore that this limit has been reached and overstepped.

For many years now the expansion of industrial undertakings has been accompanied, not by any reduction in overhead costs, but by an increase in them; the functioning of an undertaking, having become too complex to allow for efficient supervision, leaves an ever wider and wider margin for waste and brings about an accelerated, and no doubt to a certain extent a parasitic, increase in the staff whose task it is to coordinate the various branches of the undertaking. The increase in exchange, which formerly played a tremendous role as a factor in economic progress, has begun in its turn to cause more overhead expenses than it avoids, because the goods remain a long time nonproductive, because the staff dealing with exchange is itself increasing at an accelerated tempo, and because transport consumes an ever increasing amount of energy as a result of innovations for increasing speed-innovations that become necessarily more and more costly and less and less efficient as they succeed one another. Thus, in all these respects, progress is transformed nowadays, in a strictly speaking mathematical manner, into regression.

The progress achieved by the co-ordination of effort in time is doubtless the most important factor of technical progress; it is also the hardest to analyse. Ever since Marx, we have been in the habit of designating it by speaking of the substitution of inanimate labour for living labour, a dangerously vague formula in the sense that it conjures up the picture of a continuous evolution towards a stage of technique where, if one may so express it, all the jobs to be done would be done already. Such a picture is as chimerical as that of the existence of a natural source of energy as readily accessible to man as his own vital force. The substitution in question simply puts in the place of the movements that would enable certain results to be obtained directly other movements that produce these results indirectly, thanks to the purposeful arrangement of inert objects; it still remains a question of entrusting to matter what seemed to be the role of human effort, but instead of making use of the energy supplied by certain natural phenomena, use is made of the resistance, solidity, hardness possessed by certain materials. In either case, the properties of blind and indifferent matter can only be adapted to human ends by human labour; and in either case again, reason forbids one to assume in advance that this work of adaptation must necessarily be less than the effort that men would have to make so as to obtain directly the end they have in view. But whereas the utilization of natural sources of energy depends to a considerable extent on unforeseeable conjunctures, the utilization of inert and resistant materials has for the most part been effected according to a continuous progress which, once one has understood the principle involved, the mind is capable of embracing and extending.

The first stage — as old as humanity — consists in entrusting to objects disposed in suitable places all those efforts of resistance whose aim it is to prevent certain movements on the part of certain things. The second stage constitutes mechanization as such; mechanization became possible on the day when it was observed that one could not only make use of inert matter so as to ensure immobility where this was necessary, but also entrust it with maintaining the permanent relationships of movements with one other — relationships which up to then had on each occasion to be established by the mind. To this end, all that is necessary is that one should have been able to register these relationships, suitably transposed, in the forms impressed on solid matter. It is thus that one of the first developments which made for the introduction of mechanization consisted in relieving the weaver of the necessity of adapting the choice of threads to be drawn on his loom to the design of the cloth, and this by means of a piece of cardboard punched with holes corresponding to the design. If transpositions of this nature in the various branches of labour could only be obtained little by little, and thanks to inventions apparently due to inspiration or chance, it is because manual work combines the permanent elements that compose it in such a way as to conceal them more often than not under an appearance of variety; that is why sectionalized hand-fabrication had to precede big industry.

Finally, the third and last stage corresponds to automation, which is only beginning to make its appearance; the principle behind it lies in the possibility of entrusting the machine not only with an operation that is invariably the same, but also with a combination of varied operations. This combination can be as vast, as complex as you like; it is only necessary that the

variety of operations should be defined and limited beforehand. Automation, which is still, so to say, at a primitive stage of development, can thus, theoretically, develop indefinitely; and the use of such a technique for satisfying human needs knows no limits save those imposed by the share of the unforeseen in the conditions of human existence. If it were possible to conceive of conditions of existence absolutely devoid of any unforeseen contingency, then the American myth of the robot would have a meaning, and the complete abolition of human labour through a systematic organization of the world would be feasible. It is not so, and these are only fictions; though it would still be useful to formulate these fictions, as an ideal limit, if men had at least the power to reduce progressively by some method or other the share of the unforeseen in their lives. But such is not the case, either, and no technique will ever relieve men of the necessity of continually adapting, by the sweat of their brow, the mechanical equipment they use.

Under these conditions it is easy to conceive that a certain degree of automation might be more costly in human effort than a less advanced degree. At least it is easy to conceive it in an abstract way; it is almost impossible to reach any concrete notion in this matter on account of the great number of factors which would have to be taken into account. The extraction of the metals from which machines are made can be done only with human labour; and as it is a question of mining, the work becomes more and more arduous as it proceeds, not to mention the fact that the known deposits run the risk of becoming exhausted relatively quickly; men reproduce themselves, iron does not. Nor must we forget, though financial balance-sheets, statistics, the publications of economists disdain to note it, that

work in the mines is more painful, more exhausting, more dangerous than most other forms of work; iron, coal, potassium—all these products are stained with blood. Besides, automatic machines are only a paying proposition as long as they are used for mass production in enormous quantities; their functioning is therefore bound up with the chaos and waste involved in an excessive economic centralization; furthermore, they create the temptation to produce far more than is required to satisfy real needs, which leads to the squandering of precious stores of human energy and of raw materials. Nor must we leave out of account the expenditure involved in all technical progress, on account of the preliminary research required, the need for adapting other branches of production to this progress, the scrapping of old plant which is often discarded when it could still have served for a long time. Nothing of all this is capable of being even approximately measured. It is only clear, in a general way, that the higher the level of technical efficiency the more the advantages to be derived from new developments diminish as compared with the drawbacks. We have, however, no means of ascertaining exactly whether we are near or far from the limit beyond which technical progress must transform itself into a factor of economic regression. We can only try to guess at it empirically, according to the way in which our contemporary economy is evolving.

Now, what we see is that for some years past, in almost all industries, the various concerns have refused systematically to welcome technical innovations. The socialist and communist press takes advantage of this fact to pour out eloquent diatribes against capitalism, but it omits to explain by what miracle innovations that are at present costly would become economical-

ly paying under a socialist system or one so called. It is more reasonable to suppose that in this sphere we are not far from reaching the limit of useful progress; and, seeing that the present-day complexity of economic relations and the formidable extension of credit prevent industrial leaders from immediately perceiving that a once paying factor has ceased to be so, we may even conclude, with all suitable reservations regarding so intricate a problem, that it is very likely this limit has already been overstepped.

A serious study of the question ought, strictly speaking, to take many other elements into consideration. The various factors that go to increase productivity do not develop separately, although they have to be separated in analysis; they combine together, and these combinations produce results difficult to foresee. Besides, technical progress does not only serve to obtain at low cost what one used to obtain before with considerable effort; it also makes it possible to undertake what without it would have been almost unimaginable. It would be as well to examine the value of these new possibilities, while bearing in mind the fact that they are not only possibilities of construction, but also of destruction. But such a study would be forced to take into account the economic and social relations which necessarily go hand in hand with a given form of technical achievement. For the moment it is enough to have understood that the possibility of future progress so far as concerns productivity is not beyond question; that, to all appearances, we have at present as many reasons for expecting to see it diminish as increase; and, what is most important of all, that a continuous and unlimited increase in productivity is, strictly speaking, inconceivable. It is solely the frenzy produced by the speed

of technical progress that has brought about the mad idea that work might one day become unnecessary. On the plane of pure science, this idea has found expression in the search for the "perpetual motion machine", that is to say a machine which would go on producing work indefinitely without ever consuming any; and the scientists made short work of it by propounding the law of the conservation of energy. In the social sphere, divagations are better received. The "higher stage of communism", regarded by Marx as the final term of social evolution, is, in effect, a utopia absolutely analogous to that of perpetual motion.

It is in the name of this utopia that revolutionaries have shed their blood. Or rather, they have shed their blood in the name either of this utopia or of the equally utopian belief that the present system of production could be placed by a mere decree at the service of a society of free and equal men. Is it surprising, then, if all this blood has been shed in vain? The history of the working-class movement is thus lit up with a cruel, but singularly vivid, light. The whole of it can be summarized by remarking that the working class has never manifested strength save in so far as it has served something other than the workers' revolution. The working-class movement was able to give the illusion of power as long as it was still a question for it of helping to liquidate the vestiges of feudalism or to prepare the way for capitalist domination, whether under the form of private capitalism or that of State capitalism, as happened in Russia; now that its role in that field is over and the industrial crisis confronts it with the problem of the effective seizure of power by the working masses, it is crumbling away and dissolving with a rapidity that breaks the hearts of those who had

placed their faith in it. On its ruins interminable arguments are held which can only be smoothed over by the most ambiguous formulas; for among all those who still persist in talking about revolution, there are perhaps not two who attach the same content to the term. And that is not in the least surprising. The word "revolution" is a word for which you kill, for which you die, for which you send the labouring masses to their death, but which does not possess any content.

Yet perhaps one can give a meaning to the revolutionary ideal, if not as a possible prospect in view, at any rate as a theoretical limit of feasible social transformations. What we should ask of the revolution is the abolition of social oppression; but for this notion to have at least a chance of possessing some meaning, we must be careful to distinguish between oppression and subordination of personal whims to a social order. So long as such a thing as a society exists, it will circumscribe the life of individuals within quite narrow limits and impose its rules on them; but this inevitable constraint does not merit the name of oppression except in so far as, owing to the fact that it brings about a division between those who exercise it and those who are subject to it, it places the latter at the disposal of the former and thus causes those who command to exert a crushing physical and moral pressure over those who execute. Even when this distinction has been made, nothing entitles us to assume a priori that the abolition of oppression is either possible or even simply conceivable by way of limit. Marx demonstrated forcibly, in the course of analyses of whose far-reaching scope he was himself unaware, that the present system of production, namely, big industry, reduces the worker to the position of a wheel in the factory and a mere instrument in the hands of his

employers; and it is useless to hope that technical progress will, through a progressive and continuous reduction in productive effort, alleviate, to the point of almost causing it to disappear, the double burden imposed on man by nature and society.

The problem is, therefore, quite clear; it is a question of knowing whether it is possible to conceive of an organization of production which, though powerless to remove the necessities imposed by nature and the social constraint arising therefrom, would enable these at any rate to be exercised without grinding down souls and bodies under oppression. At a time like ours, to have grasped this problem clearly is perhaps a condition for being able to live at peace with oneself. If we can manage to conceive in concrete terms the conditions of this liberating organization, then it only remains for us to exercise, in order to move towards it, all the powers of action, small or great, at our disposal; and if, on the other hand, we realize clearly that the possibility of such a system of production is not even conceivable, we at least gain the advantage of being able legitimately to resign ourselves to oppression and of ceasing to regard ourselves as accomplices in it because we fail to do anything effective to prevent it.

Analysis of oppression

The problem is, in short, to know what it is that links oppression in general and each form of oppression in particular to the system of production; in other words, to succeed in grasping the mechanism of oppression, in understanding by what means it arises, subsists, transforms itself, by what means, perhaps, it might theoretically disappear. This is, to all intents and purposes, a novel question. For centuries past, noble minds have regarded the power of oppressors as constituting a usurpation pure and simple, which one had to try to oppose either by simply expressing a radical disapproval of it, or else by armed force placed at the service of justice. In either case, failure has always been complete; and never was it more strikingly so than when it took on momentarily the appearance of victory, as happened with the French Revolution, when, after having effectively succeeded in bringing about the disappearance of a certain form of oppression, people stood by, helpless, watching a new oppression immediately being set up in its place.

In his ponderings over this resounding failure, which had come to crown all previous ones, Marx finally came to understand that you cannot abolish oppression so long as the causes which make it inevitable remain, and that these causes reside in the objective—that is to say material—conditions of the social system. He consequently elaborated a completely new conception of oppression, no longer considered as the usurpation of a privilege, but as the organ of a social function. This function is

that very one which consists in developing the productive forces, in so far as this development calls for severe efforts and serious hardships; and Marx and Engels perceived a reciprocal relationship between this development and social oppression.

In the first place, according to them, oppression becomes established only when improvements in production have brought about a division of labour sufficiently advanced for exchange, military command and government to constitute distinct functions; on the other hand, oppression, once established, stimulates the further development of the productive forces, and changes in form as and when this development so demands, until the day when, having become a hindrance to it instead of a help, it disappears purely and simply.

However brilliant the concrete analyses may be by which Marxists have illustrated this thesis, and although it constitutes an improvement on the naïve expressions of indignation which it replaced, one cannot say that it throws light on the mechanism of oppression. It only partially describes its origins; for why should the division of labour necessarily turn into oppression? It by no means entitles us to a reasonable expectation of its ending; for if Marx believed himself to have shown how the capitalist system finally hinders production, he did not even attempt to prove that, in our day, any other oppressive system would hinder it in like manner. Furthermore, one fails to understand why oppression should not manage to continue, even after it has become a factor of economic regression. Above all, Marx omits to explain why oppression is invincible as long as it is useful, why the oppressed in revolt have never succeeded in founding a non-oppressive society, whether on the basis of the

productive forces of their time, or even at the cost of an economic regression which could hardly increase their misery; and, lastly, he leaves completely in the dark the general principles of the mechanism by which a given form of oppression is replaced by another.

What is more, not only have Marxists not solved a single one of these problems, but they have not even thought it their duty to formulate them. It has seemed to them that they had sufficiently accounted for social oppression by assuming that it corresponds to a function in the struggle against nature. Even then, they have only really brought out this correspondence in the case of the capitalist system; but, in any case, to suppose that such a correspondence constitutes an explanation of the phenomenon is to apply unconsciously to social organisms Lamarck's famous principle, as unintelligible as it is convenient, "the function creates the organ". Biology only started to be a science on the day when Darwin replaced this principle by the notion of conditions of existence. The improvement lies in the fact that the function is no longer considered as the cause, but as the result of the organ—the only intelligible order; the part played by cause is henceforth attributed only to a blind mechanism, that of heredity combined with accidental variations. Actually, by itself, all this blind mechanism can do is to produce haphazardly anything whatsoever; the adaptation of the organ to the function here enters into play in such a manner as to limit chance by eliminating the non-viable structures, no longer as a mysterious tendency, but as a condition of existence; and this condition is defined by the relationship of the organism under consideration to its partly inert, partly living environment, and more especially to similar rival organisms.

Adaptation is henceforth conceived in regard to living beings as an exterior and no longer an interior necessity.

It is clear that this luminous method is not only valid in biology, but wherever one is confronted by organized structures which have not been organized by anybody. In order to be able to appeal to science in social matters, we ought to have effected with respect to Marxism an improvement similar to that which Darwin effected with respect to Lamarck. The causes of social evolution must no longer be sought elsewhere than in the daily efforts of men considered as individuals. These efforts are certainly not directed haphazardly; they depend, in each individual case, on temperament, education, routine, customs, prejudices, natural or acquired needs, environment, and above all, broadly speaking, human nature, a term which, although difficult to define, is probably not devoid of meaning. But given the almost infinite diversity of individuals, and especially the fact that human nature includes among other things the ability to innovate, to create, to rise above oneself, this warp and woof of incoherent efforts would produce anything whatever in the way of social organization, were it not that chance found itself restricted in this field by the conditions of existence to which every society has to conform on pain of being either subdued or destroyed. The men who submit to these conditions of existence are more often than not unaware of them, for they act not by imposing a definite direction on the efforts of each one, but by rendering ineffective all efforts made in directions disallowed by them.

These conditions of existence are determined in the first place, as in the case of living beings, on the one hand by the

natural environment and on the other hand by the existence, activity and especially competition of other organisms of the same species, that is to say here of other social groups. But still a third factor enters into play, namely, the organization of the natural environment, capital equipment, armaments, methods of work and of warfare; and this factor occupies a special position owing to the fact that, though it acts upon the form of social organization, it in turn undergoes the latter's reaction upon it. Furthermore, this factor is the only one over which the members of a society can perhaps exercise some control.

This outline is too abstract to serve as a guide; but if on the basis of this summary view we could arrive at some concrete analyses, it would at last become possible to formulate the social problem. The enlightened goodwill of men acting in an individual capacity is the only possible principle of social progress; if social necessities, once clearly perceived, were found to lie outside the range of this goodwill in the same way as those which govern the stars, each man would have nothing more to do but to watch history unfolding as one watches the seasons go by, while doing his best to spare himself and his loved ones the misfortune of being either an instrument or a victim of social oppression. If this is not so, it would be necessary first of all to define by way of an ideal limit the objective conditions that would permit of a social organization absolutely free from oppression; then seek out by what means and to what extent the conditions actually given can be transformed so as to bring them nearer to this ideal; find out what is the least oppressive form of social organization for a body of specific objective conditions; and lastly, define in this field the power of action and responsibilities of individuals as such. Only on this

condition could political action become something analogous to a form of work, instead of being, as has been the case hitherto, either a game or a branch of magic.

Unfortunately, in order to reach this stage, what is required is not only searching, rigorous thinking, subjected, so as to avoid all possibility of error, to the most exacting checking, but also historical, technical and scientific investigations of an unparalleled range and precision, and conducted from an entirely new point of view. However, events do not wait; time will not stop in order to afford us leisure; the present forces itself urgently on our attention and threatens us with calamities which would bring in their train, amongst many other harrowing misfortunes, the material impossibility of studying or writing otherwise than in the service of the oppressors. What are we to do? There would be no point in letting oneself be swept along in the mêlée by an illconsidered enthusiasm. No one has the faintest idea of either the objectives or the means of what is still from force of habit called revolutionary action. As for reformism, the principle of the lesser evil on which it is based is certainly eminently reasonable, however discredited it may be through the fault of those who have hitherto made use of it; though remember, if it has so far served only as a pretext for capitulation, this is due not to the cowardice of a few leaders, but to an ignorance unfortunately common to all; for as long as the worst and the best have not been defined in terms of a clearly and concretely conceived ideal, and then the precise margin of possibilities determined, we do not know which is the lesser evil, and consequently we are compelled to accept under this name anything effectively imposed by those who dispose of force, since any existing evil whatever is always less

than the possible evils which uncalculating action invariably runs the risk of bringing about. Broadly speaking, blind men such as we are in these days have only the choice between surrender and adventure. And yet we cannot avoid the duty of determining here and now the attitude to adopt with regard to the present situation. That is why, until we have—if, indeed, such a thing is possible—taken to pieces the social mechanism, it is permissible perhaps to try to outline its principles; provided it be clearly understood that such a rough sketch rules out any kind of categorical assertion, and aims solely at submitting a few ideas, by way of hypotheses, to the critical examination of honest people. Besides, we are far from being without a guide on the subject. If Marx's system, in its broad outlines, is of little assistance, it is a different matter when it comes to the analyses he was led to make by the concrete study of capitalism, and in which, while believing that he was limiting himself to describing a system, he probably more than once seized upon the hidden nature of oppression itself.

Among all the forms of social organization which history has to show, there are very few which appear to be really free from oppression; and these few are not very well known. All of them correspond to an extremely low level of production, so low that the division of labour is pretty well unknown, except between the sexes, and each family produces little more than its own requirements. It is sufficiently obvious, moreover, that such material conditions necessarily rule out oppression, since each man, compelled to sustain himself personally, is continually at grips with outside nature; war itself at this stage, is war of pillage and extermination, not of conquest, because the means of consolidating a conquest and especially of turning it to account are

lacking. What is surprising is not that oppression should make its appearance only after higher forms of economy have been reached, but that it should always accompany them. This means, therefore, that as between a completely primitive economy and more highly developed forms of economy there is a difference not only of degree, but also of kind. And, in fact, although from the point of view of consumption there is but a change-over to slightly better conditions, production, which is the decisive factor, is itself transformed in its very essence. This transformation consists at first sight in a progressive emancipation with respect to nature. In completely primitive forms of production — hunting, fishing, gathering — human effort appears as a simple reaction to the inexorable pressure continually exercised on man by nature, and that in two ways. To start with, it takes place, to all intents and purposes, under immediate compulsion, under the ever-present spur of natural needs; and, by an indirect consequence, the action seems to receive its form from nature herself owing to the important part played therein by an intuition comparable to animal instinct and a patient observation of the most frequent natural phenomena, also owing to the indefinite repetition of methods that have often succeeded without men's knowing why, and which are doubtless regarded as being welcomed by nature with special favour. At this stage, each man is necessarily free with respect to other men, because he is in direct contact with the conditions of his own existence, and because nothing human interposes itself between them and him; but, on the other hand, and to the same extent, he is narrowly subjected to nature's dominion, and he shows this clearly enough by deifying her. At higher stages of production, nature's compulsion continues certainly to be exercised, and still pitilessly, but in an appar-

ently less immediate fashion; it seems to become more and more liberalized and to leave an increasing margin to man's freedom of choice, to his faculty of initiative and decision. Action is no longer tied moment by moment to nature's exigencies; men learn how to store up reserves on a long-term basis for meeting needs not yet actually felt; efforts which can be only of indirect usefulness become more and more numerous; at the same time a systematic co-ordination in time and in space becomes possible and necessary, and its importance increases continually. In short, man seems to pass by stages, with respect to nature, from servitude to dominion. At the same time nature gradually loses her divine character, and divinity more and more takes on human shape. Unfortunately, this emancipation is only a flattering semblance. In reality, at these higher stages, human action continues, as a whole, to be nothing but pure obedience to the brutal spur of an immediate necessity; only, instead of being harried by nature, man is henceforth harried by man. However, it is still the same pressure exerted by nature that continues to make itself felt, although indirectly; for oppression is exercised by force, and in the long run all force originates in nature.

The notion of force is far from simple, and yet it is the first that has to be elucidated in order to formulate the problems of society. Force and oppression — that makes two; but what needs to be understood above all is that it is not the manner in which use is made of some particular force, but its very nature, which determines whether it is oppressive or not. Marx clearly perceived this in connection with the State; he understood that this machine for grinding men down, cannot stop grinding as long as it goes on functioning, no matter in whose hands it may be. But this insight has a far more general application. Oppres-

sion proceeds exclusively from objective conditions. The first of these is the existence of privileges; and it is not men's laws or decrees which determine privileges, nor yet titles to property; it is the very nature of things. Certain circumstances, which correspond to stages, no doubt inevitable, in human development, give rise to forces which come between the ordinary man and his own conditions of existence, between the effort and the fruit of the effort, and which are, inherently, the monopoly of a few, owing to the fact that they cannot be shared among all; thenceforward these privileged beings, although they depend, in order to live, on the work of others, hold in their hands the fate of the very people on whom they depend, and equality is destroyed. This is what happens to begin with when the religious rites by which man thinks to win nature over to his side, having become too numerous and complicated to be known by all, finally become the secret and consequently the monopoly of a few priests; the priest then disposes, albeit only through a fiction, of all of nature's powers, and it is in their name that he exercises authority. Nothing essential is changed when this monopoly is no longer made up of rites but of scientific processes, and when those in possession of it are called scientists and technicians instead of priests.

Arms, too, give rise to a privilege from the day when, on the one hand, they are sufficiently powerful to render any defence by unarmed against armed men impossible, and, on the other, the handling of them has become sufficiently advanced, and consequently difficult, to require a long apprenticeship and continuous practice. For henceforth the workers are powerless to defend themselves, whereas the warriors, albeit incapable of production, always take forcible possession of the fruits of other

people's labour; the workers are thus at the mercy of the warriors, and not the other way about. The same thing applies to gold, and more generally to money, as soon as the division of labour is so far developed that no worker can live off his own products without having exchanged at any rate some of them for those of others; the organization of exchange then becomes necessarily the monopoly of a few specialists who, having money under their control, can both obtain for themselves, in order to live, the products of others' labour, and at the same time deprive the producers of the indispensably necessary.

In short, wherever, in the struggle against men or against nature, efforts need to be multiplied and co-ordinated to be effective, coordination becomes the monopoly of a few leaders as soon as it reaches a certain degree of complexity, and execution's primary law is then obedience; this is true both for the management of public affairs and for that of private undertakings. There may be other sources of privilege, but these are the chief ones; furthermore, except in the case of money, which appears at a given moment of history, all these factors enter into play under all systems of oppression; what changes is the way in which they are distributed and combined, the degree of concentration of power, and also the more or less closed and consequently more or less mysterious character of each monopoly. Nevertheless, privileges, of themselves, are not sufficient to cause oppression. Inequality could be easily mitigated by the resistance of the weak and the feeling for justice of the strong; it would not lead to a still harsher form of necessity than that of natural needs themselves, were it not for the intervention of a further factor, namely, the struggle for power.

As Marx clearly understood in the case of capitalism, and as a few moralists have perceived in a more general way, power contains a sort of fatality which weighs as pitilessly on those who command as on those who obey; nay more, it is in so far as it enslaves the former that, through their agency, it presses down upon the latter. The struggle against nature entails certain inescapable necessities which nothing can turn aside, but these necessities contain within themselves their own limits; nature resists, but she does not defend herself and where she alone is involved, each situation presents certain well-defined obstacles which arouse the best in human effort. It is altogether different as soon as relations between man and man take the place of direct contact between man and nature. The preservation of power is a vital necessity for the powerful, since it is their power which provides their sustenance; but they have to preserve it both against their rivals and against their inferiors, and these latter cannot do otherwise than try to rid themselves of dangerous masters; for, through a vicious circle, the master produces fear in the slave by the very fact that he is afraid of him, and vice versa; and the same is true as between rival powers.

What is more, the two struggles that every man of power has to wage—first against those over whom he rules, secondly against his rivals—are inextricably bound up together and each is all the time rekindling the other. A power, whatever it may be, must always tend towards strengthening itself at home by means of successes gained abroad, for such successes provide it with more powerful means of coercion; besides, the struggle against its rivals rallies behind it its own slaves, who are under the illusion they have a personal interest in the result of the battle. But, in order to obtain from the slaves the obedience and

sacrifices indispensable to victory, that power has to make itself more oppressive; to be in a position to exercise this oppression, it is still more imperatively compelled to turn outwards; and so on. We can follow out the same chain of events by starting from another link; show how a given social group, in order to be in a position to defend itself against the outside powers threatening to lay hands on it, must itself submit to an oppressive form of authority; how the power thus set up, in order to maintain its position, must stir up conflicts with rival powers; and so on, once again. Thus it is that the most fatal of vicious circles drags the whole society in the wake of its masters in a mad merry-go-round.

There are only two ways of breaking the circle, either by abolishing inequality, or else by setting up a stable power, a power such that there exists a balance between those who command and those who obey. It is this second solution that has been sought by all whom we call upholders of order, or at any rate all those among them who have been moved neither by servility nor by ambition; it was doubtless so with the Latin writers who praised "the immense majesty of the Roman peace", with Dante, with the reactionary school at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with Balzac, and is so today with sincere and thoughtful men of the Right. But this stability of power — objective of those who call themselves realists — shows itself to be a chimera, if one examines it closely, on the same grounds as the anarchists' utopia.

Between man and matter, each action, whether successful or not, establishes a balance that can only be upset from outside; for matter is inert. A displaced stone accepts its new position; the

wind consents to guide to her destination the same ship which it would have sent off her course if sails and rudder had not been properly adjusted. But men are essentially active beings and have a faculty of self-determination which they can never renounce, even should they so desire, except on the day when, through death, they drop back into the state of inert matter; so that every victory won over men contains within itself the germ of a possible defeat, unless it goes as far as extermination. But extermination abolishes power by abolishing its object. Thus there is, in the very essence of power, a fundamental contradiction that prevents it from ever existing in the true sense of the word; those who are called the masters, ceaselessly compelled to reinforce their power for fear of seeing it snatched away from them, are for ever seeking a dominion essentially impossible to attain; beautiful illustrations of this search are offered by the infernal torments in Greek mythology. It would be otherwise if one man could possess in himself a force superior to that of many other men put together; but such is never the case; the instruments of power—arms, gold, machines, magical or technical secrets—always exist independently of him who disposes of them, and can be taken up by others. Consequently all power is unstable.

Generally speaking, among human beings, since the relationships between rulers and ruled are never fully acceptable, they always constitute an irremediable disequilibrium which is continually aggravating itself; the same is true even in the sphere of private life, where love, for example, destroys all balance in the soul as soon as it seeks to dominate or to be dominated by its object. But here at any rate there is nothing external to prevent reason from returning and putting everything to rights by establishing liberty and equality; whereas social rela-

tionships, in so far as the very methods of labour and of warfare rule out equality, seem to cause madness to weigh down on mankind in the manner of an external fatality. For, owing to the fact that there is never power, but only a race for power, and that there is no term, no limit, no proportion set to this race, neither is there any limit or proportion set to the efforts that it exacts; those who give themselves up to it, compelled to do always better than their rivals, who in their turn strive to do better than they, must sacrifice not only the existence of the slaves, but their own also and that of their nearest and dearest; so it is that Agamemnon sacrificing his daughter lives again in the capitalists who, to maintain their privileges, acquiesce lightheartedly in wars that may rob them of their sons.

Thus the race for power enslaves everybody, strong and weak alike. Marx saw this clearly with reference to the capitalist system. Rosa Luxemburg used to inveigh against the aspect of "aimless merry-goround" presented by the Marxist picture of capitalist accumulation, that picture in which consumption appears as a "necessary evil" to be reduced to the minimum, a mere means for keeping alive those who devote themselves, whether as leaders or as workers, to the supreme object, which is none other than the manufacture of capital equipment, that is to say of the means of production. And yet it is the profound absurdity of this picture which gives it its profound truth; a truth which extends singularly beyond the framework of the capitalist system. The only characteristic peculiar to this system is that the instruments of industrial production are at the same time the chief weapons in the race for power; but always the methods pursued in the race for power, whatever they may be, bring men under their subjection through the same frenzy and

impose themselves on them as absolute ends. It is the reflection of this frenzy that lends an epic grandeur to works such as the *Comédie Humaine*, Shakespeare's *Histories*, the *chansons de geste*, or the *Iliad*. The real subject of the *Iliad* is the sway exercised by war over the warriors, and, through them, over humanity in general; none of them knows why each sacrifices himself and all his family to a bloody and aimless war, and that is why, all through the poem, it is the gods who are credited with the mysterious influence which nullifies peace negotiations, continually revives hostilities, and brings together again the contending forces urged by a flash of good sense to abandon the struggle.

Thus in this ancient and wonderful poem there already appears the essential evil besetting humanity, the substitution of means for ends. At times war occupies the forefront, at other times the search for wealth, at other times production; but the evil remains the same. The common run of moralists complain that man is moved by his private interest: would to heaven it were so! Private interest is a self-centred principle of action, but at the same time restricted, reasonable and incapable of giving rise to unlimited evils. Whereas, on the other hand, the law of all activities governing social life, except in the case of primitive communities, is that here each one sacrifices human life — in himself and in others — to things which are only means to a better way of living. This sacrifice takes on various forms, but it all comes back to the question of power. Power, by definition, is only a means; or to put it better, to possess a power is simply to possess means of action which exceed the very limited force that a single individual has at his disposal. But power-seeking, owing to its essential incapacity to seize hold of its object, rules

out all consideration of an end, and finally comes, through an inevitable reversal, to take the place of all ends. It is this reversal of the relationship between means and end, it is this fundamental folly that accounts for all that is senseless and bloody right through history. Human history is simply the history of the servitude which makes men — oppressors and oppressed alike — the plaything of the instruments of domination they themselves have manufactured, and thus reduces living humanity to being the chattel of inanimate chattels.

Thus it is things, not men, that prescribe the limits and laws governing this giddy race for power. Men's desires are powerless to control it. The masters may well dream of moderation, but they are prohibited from practising this virtue, on pain of defeat, except to a very slight extent; so that, apart from a few almost miraculous exceptions, such as Marcus Aurelius, they quickly become incapable even of conceiving it. As for the oppressed, their permanent revolt, which is always simmering, though it only breaks out now and then, can operate in such a way as to aggravate the evil as well as to restrict it; and on the whole it rather constitutes an aggravating factor in that it forces the masters to make their power weigh ever more heavily for fear of losing it.

From time to time the oppressed manage to drive out one team of oppressors and to replace it by another, and sometimes even to change the form of oppression; but as for abolishing oppression itself that would first mean abolishing the sources of it, abolishing all the monopolies, the magical and technical secrets that give a hold over nature, armaments, money, co-ordination of labour. Even if the oppressed were sufficiently

conscious to make up their minds to do so, they could not succeed. It would be condemning themselves to immediate enslavement by the social groupings that had not carried out the same change; and even were this danger to be miraculously averted, it would be condemning themselves to death, for, once men have forgotten the methods of primitive production and have transformed the natural environment into which these fitted, they cannot recover immediate contact with nature.

It follows that, in spite of so many vague desires to put an end to madness and oppression, the concentration of power and the aggravation of its tyrannical character would know no bounds were these not by good fortune found in the nature of things. It behoves us to determine roughly what these bounds can be; and for this purpose we must keep in mind the fact that, if oppression is a necessity of social life, this necessity has nothing providential about it. It is not because it becomes detrimental to production that oppression can come to an end; the "revolt of the productive forces", so naïvely invoked by Trotsky as a factor in history, is a pure fiction. We should be mistaken likewise in assuming that oppression to be ineluctable as soon as the productive forces have been sufficiently developed to ensure welfare and leisure for all. Aristotle admitted that there would no longer be anything to stand in the way of the abolition of slavery if it were possible to have the indispensable jobs done by "mechanical slaves", and when Marx attempted to forecast the future of the human species, all he did was to take up this idea and develop it. It would be true if men were guided by considerations of welfare; but from the days of the *Iliad* to our own times, the senseless demands made by the struggle for power have taken away even the leisure for thinking about welfare. The raising of

the output of human effort will remain powerless to lighten the load of this effort as long as the social structure implies the reversal of the relationship between means and ends, in other words, as long as the methods of labour and of warfare give to a few men a discretionary power over the masses; for the fatigues and privations that have become unnecessary in the struggle against nature will be absorbed by the war carried on between men for the defence or acquisition of privileges. Once society is divided up into men who command and men who execute, the whole of social life is governed by the struggle for power, and the struggle for subsistence only enters in as one factor, indispensable to be sure, of the former.

The Marxist view, according to which social existence is determined by the relations between man and nature established by production, certainly remains the only sound basis for any historical investigation; only these relations must be considered first of all in terms of the problem of power, the means of subsistence forming simply one of the data of this problem. This order seems absurd, but it merely reflects the essential absurdity lying at the very heart of social life. A scientific study of history would thus be a study of the actions and reactions which are perpetually arising between the organization of power and the methods of production; for although power depends on the material conditions of life, it never ceases to transform these conditions themselves. Such a study goes very far beyond our possibilities at the moment; but before grappling with the infinite complexity of the facts, it is useful to make an abstract diagram of this interplay of actions and reactions, rather in the same way as astronomers have had to invent an imaginary ce-

lestial sphere so as to find their way about among the movements and positions of the stars.

We must try first of all to draw up a list of the inevitable necessities which limit all species of power. In the first place, any sort of power relies upon instruments which have in each situation a given scope. Thus you do not command in the same way, by means of soldiers armed with bows and arrows, spears and swords as you do by means of aeroplanes and incendiary bombs; the power of gold depends on the role played by exchanges in economic life; that of technical secrets is measured by the difference between what you can accomplish with their aid and what you can accomplish without them; and so on. As a matter of fact, one must always include in this balance-sheet the subterfuges by which the powerful obtain through persuasion what they are totally unable to obtain by force, either by placing the oppressed in a situation such that they have or think they have an immediate interest in doing what is asked of them, or by inspiring them with a fanaticism calculated to make them accept any and every sacrifice. Secondly, since the power that a human being really exercises extends only to what is effectively under his control, power is always running up against the actual limits of the controlling faculty, and these are extremely narrow. For no single mind can encompass a whole mass of ideas at once; no man can be in several places at once; and for master and slave alike there are never more than twenty-four hours in a day. Collaboration apparently constitutes a remedy for this drawback; but as it is never absolutely free from rivalry, it gives rise to infinite complications. The faculties of examining, comparing, weighing, deciding, combining are essentially individual, and consequently the same thing applies also to power, whose exercise is insepara-

ble from these faculties; collective power is a fiction, at any rate in final analysis. As for the number of interests that can come under the control of one single man, that depends to a very large extent on individual factors such as breadth and quickness of intelligence, capacity for work, firmness of character; but it also depends on the objective conditions of the control exercised, more or less rapid methods of transport and communication, simplicity or otherwise of the machinery of power. Lastly, the exercise of any form of power is subject to the existence of a surplus in the production of commodities, and a sufficiently large surplus so that all those engaged, whether as masters or as slaves, in the struggle for power, may be able to live. Obviously, the extent of such surplus depends on the methods of production, and consequently also on the social organization. Here, therefore, are three factors that enable one to conceive political and social power as constituting at each moment something analogous to a measurable force. However, in order to complete the picture, one must bear in mind that the men who find themselves in relationship, whether as masters or as slaves, with the phenomenon of power are unconscious of this analogy. The powerful, be they priests, military leaders, kings or capitalists, always believe that they command by divine right; and those who are under them feel themselves crushed by a power which seems to them either divine or diabolical, but in any case supernatural. Every oppressive society is cemented by this religion of power, which falsifies all social relations by enabling the powerful to command over and above what they are able to impose; it is only otherwise in times of popular agitation, times when, on the contrary, all — rebellious slaves and threatened masters alike — forget how heavy and how solid the chains of oppression are.

Thus a scientific study of history ought to begin by analysing the reactions brought to bear at each moment by power on the conditions which assign to it objectively its limits; and a hypothetical sketch of the play of these reactions is indispensable in order to conduct such an analysis, far too difficult, incidentally, considering our present possibilities. Some of these reactions are conscious and willed. Every power consciously strives, in proportion to the means at its disposal—a proportion determined by the social organization—to improve production and official control within its own sphere; history offers many an example of this, from the Pharaohs down to the present day, and it is on this that the notion of enlightened despotism is founded. On the other hand, every power strives also, and again consciously, to destroy among its competitors the means whereby to produce and govern, and is the object on their part of a similar attempt. Thus the struggle for power is at the same time constructive and destructive, and brings about economic progress or decadence, depending on whichever aspect wins the day; and it is clear that in a given civilization destruction will take place to an extent all the greater the more difficult it is for a power to expand without coming up against rival powers approximately as strong as itself. But the indirect consequences of the exercise of power are far more important than the conscious efforts of the wielders of power.

Every power, from the mere fact that it is exercised, extends to the farthest possible limit the social relations on which it is based; thus military power multiplies wars, commercial capital multiplies exchanges. Now it sometimes happens, through a sort of providential accident, that this extension gives rise, by some mechanism or other, to new resources that make

a new extension possible, and so on, more or less in the same way as food strengthens living beings in full process of growth and enables them thus to win still more food so as to acquire still greater strength. All régimes provide examples of such providential accidents; for without them no form of power could endure, and consequently those powers that benefit from them are the only ones to subsist. Thus war enabled the Romans to carry off slaves, that is to say workers in the prime of life, whom others had had to provide for during childhood; the profit derived from slave labour made it possible to reinforce the army, and the stronger army undertook more important wars which brought in new and bigger consignments of slaves as booty. Similarly, the roads which the Romans built for military purposes later facilitated the government and exploitation of the conquered provinces, and thus contributed towards storing up resources for future wars.

If we turn now to modern times, we see, for example, that the extension of exchanges has brought about a greater division of labour, which in its turn has made a wider circulation of commodities indispensable; furthermore, the increased productivity which has resulted from this has furnished new resources that have been able to transform themselves into commercial and industrial capital. As far as big industry is concerned, it is clear that each important advance in mechanization has created at the same time resources, instruments and a stimulus towards a further advance. Similarly, it was the technique of big industry which came to provide the means of control and information indispensable to the centralized economy that is the inevitable outcome of big industry, such as the telegraph, the telephone, the daily press. The same may be said

with regard to the means of transport. One could find all through history an immense number of similar examples, bearing on the widest and the narrowest aspects of social life. One may define the growth of a system by the fact that all it needs to do is to function in order to create new resources enabling it to function on a larger scale.

This phenomenon of automatic development is so striking that one would be tempted to imagine that a happily constituted system, if one may so express it, would go on enduring and progressing endlessly. That is exactly what the nineteenth century, socialists included, imagined with regard to the system of big industry. But if it is easy to imagine in a vague way an oppressive system that would never fall into decadence, it is no longer the same if one wants to conceive clearly and concretely the indefinite extension of a specific power. If it could extend endlessly its means of control, it would tend indefinitely towards a limit which would be something like ubiquity; if it could extend its resources endlessly, everything would be as though surrounding nature were evolving gradually towards that unqualified abundance from which Adam and Eve benefited in the earthly paradise; and, finally, if it could extend indefinitely the range of its own instruments—whether it be a question of arms, gold, technical secrets, machines or anything else—it would tend towards abolishing that correlation which, by indissolubly linking together the notions of master and of slave, establishes between master and slave a relationship of mutual dependence.

One cannot prove that all this is impossible; but one must assume that it is impossible, or else decide to think of human

history as a fairytale. In general, one can only regard the world in which we live as subject to laws if one admits that every phenomenon in it is limited; and it is the same for the phenomenon of power, as Plato had understood. If we want to consider power as a conceivable phenomenon, we must think that it can extend the foundations on which it rests up to a certain point only, after which it comes up, as it were, against an impassable wall. But even so it is not in a position to stop; the spur of competition forces it to go ever farther and farther, that is to say to go beyond the limits within which it can be effectively exercised. It extends beyond what it is able to control; it commands over and above what it can impose; it spends in excess of its own resources. Such is the internal contradiction which every oppressive system carries within itself like a seed of death; it is made up of the opposition between the necessarily limited character of the material bases of power and the necessarily unlimited character of the race for power considered as relationship between men.

For as soon as a power goes beyond the limits assigned to it by the nature of things, it narrows down the bases on which it rests, renders these limits themselves narrower and narrower. By spreading beyond what it is able to control, it breeds a parasitism, a waste, a confusion which, once they have appeared, increase automatically. By attempting to command where actually it is not in a position to compel obedience, it provokes reactions which it can neither foresee nor deal with. Finally, by wishing to spread the exploitation of the oppressed beyond what the objective resources make possible, it exhausts these resources themselves; this is doubtless what is meant by the ancient and popular tale of the goose with the golden eggs. Whatever may be the sources from whence the exploiters draw

the material goods which they appropriate, a day arrives when such and such a method of development, which was at first, as it went on spreading, more and more productive, finally becomes, on the other hand, increasingly costly. That is how the Roman army, which had fi rst of all brought wealth to Rome, ended by ruining it; that is how the knights of the Middle Ages, whose battles had first of all brought a relative security to the peasants, who found themselves to a certain extent protected against acts of brigandage, ended in the course of their interminable wars by laying waste the countryside which fed them; and it certainly seems as though capitalism is passing through a phase of this kind. Once more, it cannot be proved that it must always be so; but it has to be assumed, unless the possibility of inexhaustible resources is also assumed. Thus it is the nature itself of things which constitutes that justice-dealing divinity the Greeks worshipped under the name of Nemesis, and which punishes excess.

When a specific form of domination finds itself thus arrested in its development and faced with decadence, it does not follow that it begins to disappear progressively; sometimes it is then, on the contrary, that it becomes most harshly oppressive, that it crushes human beings under its weight, that it grinds down body, heart and spirit without mercy. However, since everyone begins little by little to feel the lack of the resources required by some to maintain their supremacy, by others to live, a time comes when, on every hand, there is a feverish search for expedients. There is no reason why such a search should not remain fruitless; and in that case the régime can only end by collapsing for want of the means of subsistence and being replaced, not by another and better organised régime, but

by a disorder, a poverty, a primitive condition of existence which continue until some new factor or other gives rise to new relationships of force. If it happens otherwise, if the search for new material resources is successful, new patterns of social life arise and a change of régime begins to form slowly and, as it were, subterraneously. Subterraneously, because these new forms can only develop in so far as they are compatible with the established order and do not represent, in appearance at any rate, any danger for the powers that be; otherwise nothing could prevent these powers from destroying them, as long as they remain the stronger. For the new social patterns to triumph over the old, this continued development must already have brought them to play effectively a more important role in the functioning of the social organism; in other words, they must have given rise to more powerful forces than those at the disposal of the official authorities. Thus there is never really any break in continuity, not even when the change of régime seems to be the result of a bloody struggle; for all that victory then does is to sanction forces that, even before the struggle, were the decisive factor in the life of the community, social patterns that had long since begun gradually to replace those on which the declining régime rested. So it was that, under the Roman Empire, the barbarians had begun to occupy the most important posts, the army was disintegrating little by little into armed bands led by adventurers, and the system of military colonies gradually replaced slavery by serfdom—all this long before the great invasions. Similarly, the French bourgeoisie did not by any means wait until 1789 to get the better of the nobility. The Russian Revolution, thanks to a singular conjunction of circumstances, certainly seemed to give rise to some-

thing entirely new; but the truth is that the privileges it abolished had not for a long time rested on any social foundation other than tradition; that the institutions arising out of the insurrection did not perhaps effectively function for as long as a single morning; and that the real forces, namely big industry, the police, the army, the bureaucracy, far from being smashed by the Revolution, attained, thanks to it, a power unknown in other countries.

Generally speaking, the sudden reversal of the relationship between forces which is what we usually understand by the term "revolution" is not only a phenomenon unknown in history, but furthermore, if we examine it closely, something literally inconceivable, for it would be a victory of weakness over force, the equivalent of a balance whose lighter scale were to go down. What history offers us is slow transformations of régimes, in which the bloody events to which we give the name "revolutions" play a very secondary role, and from which they may even be absent; such is the case when the social class which ruled in the name of the old relationships of force manages to keep a part of the power under cover of the new relationships, and the history of England supplies an example. But whatever may be the patterns taken by social transformations, all one finds, if one tries to lay bare the mechanism, is a dreary play of blind forces that unite together or clash, that progress or decline, that replace each other, without ever ceasing to grind beneath them the unfortunate race of human beings. At first sight there seems to be no weak spot in this sinister mesh of circumstances through which an attempt at deliverance might find its way. But it is not from such a vague, abstract and miserably hasty sketch as this that one can claim to draw any conclusion.

We must pose once again the fundamental problem, namely, what constitutes the bond which seems hitherto to have united social oppression and progress in the relations between man and nature? If one considers human development as a whole up to our own time, if, above all, one contrasts primitive tribes, organized practically without inequality, with our present-day civilization, it seems as if man cannot manage to lighten the yoke imposed by natural necessities without an equal increase in the weight of that imposed by social oppression, as though by the play of a mysterious equilibrium. And even, what is stranger still, it would seem that if, in fact, the human collectivity has to a large extent freed itself from the crushing burden which the gigantic forces of nature place on frail humanity, it has, on the other hand, taken in some sort nature's place to the point of crushing the individual in a similar manner.

What makes primitive man a slave? The fact that he hardly orders his own activity at all; he is the plaything of need, which dictates each of his movements or very nearly, and harries him with its relentless spur; and his actions are regulated not by his own intelligence, but by the customs and caprices—both equally incomprehensible—of a nature that he can but worship with blind submission. If we consider simply the collectivity, men seem nowadays to have raised themselves to a condition that is diametrically the opposite of that servile state. Hardly a single one of their tasks constitutes a mere response to the imperative impulsion of need; work is accomplished in such a way as to take charge of nature and to organize her so that needs can be satisfied. Humanity no longer believes itself to be in the presence of capricious divinities whose good graces must be won over; it knows that it has merely to handle inert matter, and acquits itself

of this task by methodically following out clearly conceived laws. At last we seem to have reached that epoch predicted by Descartes when men would use "the force and actions of fire, water, air, the stars and all the other bodies" in the same way as they do the artisans' tools, and would thus make themselves masters of nature. But, by a strange inversion, this collective dominion transforms itself into servitude as soon as one descends to the scale of the individual, and into a servitude fairly closely resembling that associated with primitive conditions of existence.

The efforts of the modern worker are imposed on him by a constraint as brutal, as pitiless and which holds him in as tight a grip as hunger does the primitive hunter. From the time of that primitive hunter up to that of the worker in our large factories, passing by way of the Egyptian workers driven by the lash, the slaves of antiquity, the serfs of the Middle Ages constantly threatened by the seigniorial sword, men have never ceased to be goaded to work by some outside force and on pain of almost immediate death. And as for the sequence of movements in work, that, too, is often imposed from outside on our workers, exactly as in the case of primitive men, and is as mysterious for the ones as it was for the others; what is more, in this respect, the constraint is in certain cases incomparably more brutal today than it has ever been. However tied and bound a primitive man was to routine and blind gropings, he could at least try to think things out, to combine and innovate at his own risk, a liberty which is absolutely denied to a worker engaged in a production line. Lastly, if humanity appears to have reached the stage of controlling those forces of nature which, however, in Spinoza's words, "infinitely surpass those of mankind" — and that in almost as sovereign a fashion as a rid-

er controls his horse — that victory does not belong to men taken individually; only the largest collectivities are in a position to handle "the force and actions of fire, water, . . . and all the other bodies that surround us"; as for the members of these collectivities, both oppressors and oppressed are alike subjected to the implacable demands of the struggle for power.

Thus, in spite of progress, man has not emerged from the servile condition in which he found himself when he was handed over weak and naked to all the blind forces that make up the universe; it is merely that the power which keeps him on his knees has been as it were transferred from inert matter to the human society of which he is a member. That is why it is this society which is imposed on his worship through all the various forms that religious feeling takes in turn. Hence the social question poses itself in a fairly clear manner; the mechanism of this transfer must be examined; we must try to find out why man has had to pay this price for his power over nature; form an idea of what would constitute the least unhappy position for him to be in, that is to say the one in which he would be the least enslaved to the twin domination of nature and society; and lastly, discern what roads can lead towards such a position, and what instruments present-day civilization could place in men's hands if they aspired to transform their lives in this way.

We accept material progress too easily as a gift of the gods, as something which goes without saying; we must look fairly and squarely at the conditions at the cost of which it takes place. Primitive life is something easy to understand; man is spurred on by hunger, or at any rate by the anguished thought

that he will soon go hungry, and he sets off in search of food; he shivers in the cold, or at any rate at the thought that he will soon feel cold, and he goes in search of heat-creating or heat-preserving materials; and so on. As for the way in which to set about the matter, this is given him in the first place by the habit acquired in childhood of imitating his seniors, and also as a result of the habits which he has given himself in the course of innumerable tentative efforts, by repeating those methods which have succeeded; when caught off his guard, he continues to proceed by trial and error, spurred on as he is to act by a sharp urge which never leaves him a moment's peace. In all this process, man has only to yield to his own nature, not master it.

On the other hand, as soon as we pass to a more advanced stage of civilization, everything becomes miraculous. Men are then found laying by things that are good to consume, desirable things, which they nevertheless go without. They are found giving up to a large extent the search for food, warmth, etc., and spending the best part of their energy on apparently unprofitable labours. As a matter of fact, most of these labours, far from being unprofitable, are infinitely more profitable than the efforts of primitive man, for they result in an organization of outside nature in a manner favourable to human existence; but this efficacy is indirect and often separated from the actual effort by so many intermediaries that the mind has difficulty in covering them; it is a long-term efficacy, often so long-term that it is only future generations which will benefit from it; while, on the other hand, the utter fatigue, physical pains and dangers connected with these labours are felt immediately, and all the time. Now, everybody knows from his own experience how unusual it is for an abstract idea having a longterm utility

to triumph over present pains, needs and desires. It must, however, do so in the matter of social existence, on pain of a regression to a primitive form of life.

But what is more miraculous still is the co-ordination of labour. Any reasonably high level of production presupposes a more or less extensive co-operation; and co-operation shows itself in the fact that the efforts of each one have meaning and efficacy only through their relationship to and exact correspondence with the efforts of all the rest, in such a way that all the efforts together form one single collective piece of work. In other words, the movements of several men must be combined according to the manner in which the movements of a single man are combined. But how can this be done? A combination can only take place if it is intellectually conceived; while a relationship is never formed except within one mind. The number 2 thought of by one man cannot be added to the number 2 thought of by another man so as to make up the number 4; similarly, the idea that one of the cooperators has of the partial work he is carrying out cannot be combined with the idea that each of the others has of his respective task so as to form a coherent piece of work. Several human minds cannot become united in one collective mind, and the expressions "collective soul", "collective thought", so commonly employed nowadays, are altogether devoid of meaning. Consequently, for the efforts of several to be combined, they all need to be directed by one and the same mind, as the famous line in Faust expresses it: "One mind is enough for a thousand hands."

In the egalitarian organization of primitive tribes, it is not possible to solve a single one of these problems, neither that of

privation, nor that of incentive to effort, nor that of co-ordination of labour; on the other hand, social oppression provides an immediate solution, by creating, to put it broadly, two categories of men—those who command and those who obey. The leader co-ordinates without difficulty the efforts of those who are under his orders; he has no temptation to overcome in order to reduce them to what is strictly necessary; and as for the stimulus to effort, an oppressive organization is admirably equipped for driving men beyond the limit of their strength, some being whipped by ambition, others, in Homer's words, "under the goad of a harsh necessity".

The results are often extraordinary when the division between social categories is deep enough for those who decide what work shall be done never to be exposed to feeling or even knowing about the exhausting fatigue, the pains and the dangers of it, while those who do it and suffer have no choice, being continually under the sway of a more or less disguised menace of death. Thus it is that man escapes to a certain extent from the caprices of blind nature only by handing himself over to the no less blind caprices of the struggle for power. This is never truer than when man reaches—as in our case—a technical development sufficiently advanced to give him the mastery over the forces of nature; for, in order that this may be so, co-operation has to take place on such a vast scale that the leaders find they have to deal with a mass of affairs which lie utterly beyond their capacity to control. As a result, humanity finds itself as much the plaything of the forces of nature, in the new form that technical progress has given them, as it ever was in primitive times; we have had, are having, and will continue to have bitter experience of this. As for attempts to preserve tech-

nique while shaking off oppression, they at once provoke such laziness and such confusion that those who have engaged in them are more often than not obliged to place themselves again almost immediately under the yoke; the experiment was tried out on a small scale in the producers' co-operatives, on a vast scale at the time of the Russian Revolution. It would seem that man is born a slave, and that servitude is his natural condition.

Theoretical picture of a free society

And yet nothing on earth can stop man from feeling himself born for liberty. Never, whatever may happen, can he accept servitude; for he is a thinking creature. He has never ceased to dream of a boundless liberty, whether as a past state of happiness of which a punishment has deprived him, or as a future state of happiness that is due to him by reason of a sort of pact with some mysterious providence. The communism imagined by Marx is the most recent form this dream has taken. This dream has always remained vain, as is the case with all dreams, or, if it has been able to bring consolation, this has only been in the form of an opium; the time has come to give up dreaming of liberty, and to make up one's mind to conceive it.

Perfect liberty is what we must try to represent clearly to ourselves, not in the hope of attaining it, but in the hope of attaining a less imperfect liberty than is our present condition; for the better can be conceived only by reference to the perfect. One can only steer towards an ideal. The ideal is just as unattainable as the dream, but differs from the dream in that it concerns reality; it enables one, as a mathematical limit, to grade situations, whether real or realizable, in an order of value from least to greatest. Perfect liberty cannot be conceived as consisting merely in the disappearance of that necessity whose pressure weighs continually upon us; as long as man goes on existing, that is to say as long as he continues to constitute an infinitesimal fraction of this pitiless universe, the pressure exerted by

necessity will never be relaxed for one single moment. A state of things in which man had as much enjoyment and as little fatigue as he liked can, except in fiction, find no place in the world in which we live. It is true that nature is milder or harsher towards human needs according to climate, and perhaps depending on the period; but to look expectantly for the miraculous invention that would render her mild everywhere, and once and for all, is about as reasonable as the hopes formerly placed in the year 1000. Besides, if we examine this fiction closely, it does not even seem that it is worth a single regret. We have only to bear in mind the weakness of human nature to understand that an existence from which the very notion of work had pretty well disappeared would be delivered over to the play of the passions and perhaps to madness; there is no selfmastery without discipline, and there is no other source of discipline for man than the effort demanded in overcoming external obstacles. A nation of idlers might well amuse itself by giving itself obstacles to overcome, exercise itself in the sciences, in the arts, in games; but the efforts that are the result of pure whim do not form for a man a means of controlling his own whims. It is the obstacles we encounter and that have to be overcome which give us the opportunity for self-conquest. Even the apparently freest forms of activity, science, art, sport, only possess value in so far as they imitate the accuracy, rigour, scrupulousness which characterize the performance of work, and even exaggerate them. Were it not for the model offered them unconsciously by the ploughman, the blacksmith, the sailor who work *comme il faut*—to use that admirably ambiguous expression—they would sink into the purely arbitrary. The only liberty that can be attributed to the Golden Age is that

which little children would enjoy if parents did not impose rules on them; it is in reality only an unconditional surrender to caprice. The human body can in no case cease to depend on the mighty universe in which it is encased; even if man were to cease being subjected to material things and to his fellows by needs and dangers, he would only be more completely delivered into their hands by the emotions which would stir him continually to the depths of his soul, and against which no regular occupation would any longer protect him. If one were to understand by liberty the mere absence of all necessity, the word would be emptied of all concrete meaning but it would not then represent for us that which, when we are deprived of it, takes away the value from life.

One can understand by liberty something other than the possibility of obtaining without effort what is pleasureable. There exists a very different conception of liberty, an heroic conception which is that of common wisdom. True liberty is not defined by a relationship between desire and its satisfaction, but by a relationship between thought and action; the absolutely free man would be he whose every action proceeded from a preliminary judgment concerning the end which he set himself and the sequence of means suitable for attaining this end. It matters little whether the actions in themselves are easy or painful, or even whether they are crowned with success; pain and failure can make a man unhappy, but cannot humiliate him as long as it is he himself who disposes of his own capacity for action. And ordering one's own actions does not signify in any way acting arbitrarily; arbitrary actions do not proceed from any exercise of judgment, and cannot properly speaking be called free. Every judgment bears upon an objective set of circumstances, and con-

sequently upon a warp and woof of necessities. Living man can on no account cease to be hemmed in on all sides by an absolutely inflexible necessity; but since he is a thinking creature, he can choose between either blindly submitting to the spur with which necessity pricks him on from outside, or else adapting himself to the inner representation of it that he forms in his own mind; and it is in this that the contrast between servitude and liberty lies.

The two terms of this contrast are, moreover, but ideal limits between which human life moves without ever being able to reach either, on pain of ceasing any longer to be life. A man would be completely a slave if all his movements proceeded from a source other than his mind, namely, either the irrational reactions of the body, or else the mind of other people; primitive man, ravenous, his every bound provoked by the spasms tearing at his belly, the Roman slave perpetually keyed up to execute the orders of an overseer armed with a whip, the manual worker of our own day engaged in a production line, all these approach that wretched condition. As for complete liberty, one can find an abstract model of it in a properly solved problem in arithmetic or geometry; for in a problem all the elements of the solution are given, and man can look for assistance only to his own judgment, alone capable of establishing between these elements the relationship which by itself constitutes the solution sought. The efforts and successes attending mathematics do not go beyond the compass of the sheet of paper, the realm of signs and figures; a completely free life would be one wherein all real difficulties presented themselves as kinds of problems, wherein all successes were as solutions carried into action. All the elements of success would then be given, that is to say known and able to be handled as are the ma-

thematician's signs; to obtain the desired result it would be enough to place these elements in relation, thanks to the methodical direction the mind would impart, no longer to mere pen-strokes, but to effective movements that would leave their mark in the world. Or to put it better, the performance of any work whatever would consist in as conscious and as methodical a combination of efforts as can be the combination of numbers by which the solution of a problem is brought about when this solution results from reflection.

Man would then have his fate constantly in his own hands; at each moment he would forge the conditions of his own existence by an act of mind. Mere desire, it is true, would lead him nowhere; he would receive nothing gratuitously; and even the possibilities of effective effort would for him be strictly limited. But the very fact of not being able to obtain anything without having brought into action, in order to acquire it, all the powers of mind and body would enable man to tear himself away for good from the blind grip of the passions. A clear view of what is possible and what impossible, what is easy and what difficult, of the labours that separate the project from its accomplishment—this alone does away with insatiable desires and vain fears; from this and not from anything else proceed moderation and courage, virtues without which life is nothing but a disgraceful frenzy. Besides, the source of any kind of virtue lies in the shock produced by the human intelligence being brought up against a matter devoid of lenience and of falsity. It is not possible to conceive of a nobler destiny for man than that which brings him directly to grips with naked necessity, without his being able to expect anything except through his own exertions, and such that his life is a continual creation of him-

self by himself. Man is a limited being to whom it is not given to be, as in the case of the God of the theologians, the direct author of his own existence; but he would possess the human equivalent of that divine power if the material conditions that enable him to exist were exclusively the work of his mind directing the effort of his muscles. This would be true liberty.

Such liberty is only an ideal, and cannot be found in reality any more than a perfectly straight line can be drawn with a pencil. But it will be useful to conceive this ideal if we can discern at the same time what it is that separates us from it, and what are the circumstances that can cause us to move away from it or approach nearer to it. The first obstacle which appears is formed by the complexity and size of this world with which we have to deal: these infinitely outstrip our mental range. The difficulties of real life do not constitute problems made to our scale; they are like problems possessing an innumerable quantity of data, for matter is doubly indefinite, from the point of view of extent and from that of divisibility. That is why it is impossible for a human mind to take into account all the factors on which the success of what seems to be the simplest action depends; any given situation whatever leaves the door open to innumerable chance possibilities, and things escape our mind as water does between the fingers of our cupped hands. Hence it would seem that the mind is only able to exercise itself upon unreal combinations of signs, and that action must be reduced to the blindest form of groping. But, in fact, this is not so. It is true that we can never act with absolute certainty; but that does not matter so much as one might suppose. We can easily accept the fact that the results of our actions are dependent on accidents outside our control; what we must at

all costs preserve from chance are our actions themselves, and that in such a way as to place them under the control of the mind. To achieve this, all that is necessary is that man should be able to conceive a chain of intermediaries linking the movements he is capable of to the results he wishes to obtain; and he can often do this, thanks to the relative stability that persists, athwart the blind cross-currents of the universe, on the scale of the human organism, and which alone enables that organism to subsist. It is true that this chain of intermediaries is never anything more than an abstract diagram; when one starts carrying out the action, accidents can arise at every moment to frustrate the most carefully drawn-up plans; but if the intelligence has been able clearly to elaborate the abstract plan of the action to be carried out, this means that it has managed, not of course to eliminate chance, but to give it a circumscribed and limited role, and, as it were, to filter it, by classifying with respect to this particular plan the undefined mass of possible accidents in a few clearly-defined series. Thus, the intelligence is powerless to get its bearings amid the innumerable eddies formed by wind and water on the high seas; but if we place in the midst of these swirling waters a boat whose sails and rudder are fixed in such and such a manner it is possible to draw up a list of the actions which they can cause it to undergo. All tools are thus, in a more or less perfect way, in the manner of instruments for defining chance events. Man could in this way eliminate chance, if not in his surroundings, at any rate within himself; however, even that is an unattainable ideal. The world is too full of situations whose complexity is beyond us for instinct, routine, trial and error, improvising ever to be able to cease playing a role in our labours; all man can do is to restrict

this role more and more, thanks to scientific and technical progress. What matters is that this role should be subordinate and should not prevent method from constituting the very soul of work. It is also necessary that it should appear as provisional, and that routine and trial and error should always be regarded not as principles of action, but as make-shifts for the purpose of filling up the gaps in methodical conception; in this scientific hypotheses are a powerful aid by making us conceive half-understood phenomena as governed by laws comparable to those which determine the most clearly understood phenomena. And even in cases where we know nothing at all, we can still assume that similar laws are applicable; this is sufficient to eliminate, in default of ignorance, the feeling of mystery, and to make us understand that we live in a world in which man has only himself to look to for miracles.

There is, however, one source of mystery that we cannot eliminate, and which is none other than our own body. The extreme complexity of vital phenomena can perhaps be progressively unravelled, at any rate to a certain extent; but the immediate relationship linking our thoughts to our movements will always remain wrapped in impenetrable obscurity. In this sphere we cannot conceive any form of necessity, from the very fact that we cannot determine what are the intermediate links; moreover, the idea of necessity, as formed in the human mind, is, properly speaking, only applicable to matter. One cannot even discover in the phenomena in question, in default of a clearly conceivable necessity, an even approximate regularity. At times the reactions of the living body are completely foreign to the mind; at other times, but rarely, they simply carry out its orders; more often they accomplish what the mind has desired

without the latter taking any part therein; often also they accompany the wishes formed in the mind without corresponding to them in any way; at other times again they precede the mind's thoughts. No classification is possible. That is why, when the movements of the living body play the major role in the struggle against nature, the very notion of necessity can with difficulty take shape; when these are successful, nature seems to be immediately obeying or complying with desires, and, when unsuccessful, to be rejecting them. This is what takes place in actions accomplished either without instruments or with instruments so well adapted to living members that all they do is to act as an extension of the natural movements of such. We can thus understand how primitive men, in spite of their very great dexterity in accomplishing all they have to do in order to continue to exist, visualize the relationship between man and the world under the aspect not of work but of magic. Between them and the web of necessities which constitutes nature and defines the real conditions of existence, all sorts of mysterious caprices, at whose mercy they believe themselves to be, henceforth interpose themselves in the manner of a screen; and however little oppressive the society which they form may be, they are none the less its slaves from the point of view of these imaginary caprices, often interpreted, furthermore, by priests and sorcerers of flesh and blood. These beliefs survive in the form of superstitions, and, contrary to what we like to think, no man is completely free from them; but their spell loses its potency in proportion as, in the struggle against nature, the living body assumes a secondary importance and passive instruments a primary importance. Such is the case when instruments, ceasing to be fashioned according to the structure of

the human organism, force the latter, on the contrary, to adapt its movements to their own shape. Thenceforward there is no longer any correspondence between the motions to be carried out and the passions; the mind has to get away from desire and fear and apply itself solely to establishing an exact relationship between the movements imparted to the instruments and the objective aimed at. The docility of the body in such a case is a kind of miracle, but a miracle which the mind may ignore; the body, rendered as it were fluid through habit, to use Hegel's beautiful expression, simply causes the movements conceived in the mind to pass into the instruments. The attention is directed exclusively to the combinations formed by the movements of inert matter, and the idea of necessity appears in its purity, without any admixture of magic. For example, on dry land and borne along by the desires and fears that move his legs for him, man often finds that he has passed from one place to another without being aware of it; on the sea, on the other hand, as desires and fears have no hold over the boat, one has continually to use craft and strategy, set sails and rudder, transmute the thrust of the wind by means of a series of devices which can only be the work of a clear intelligence. You cannot entirely reduce the human body to this docile intermediary role between mind and instrument, but you can reduce it more and more to that role; this is what every technical advance helps to bring about.

But, unfortunately, even if you did manage strictly and in full detail to subject all forms of work without exception to methodical thought, a new obstacle to liberty would immediately arise on account of the profound difference in kind which separates theoretical speculation from action. In reality, there is

nothing in common between the solution of a problem and the carrying out of an even perfectly methodical piece of work, between the sequence of ideas and the sequence of movements. The man who tackles a difficulty of a theoretical order proceeds by moving from what is simple to what is complex, from what is clear to what is obscure; the movements of the manual worker, on the other hand, are not some of them clearer and simpler than others, it is merely that those which come before are the condition of those which come after. Moreover, the mind more often than not musters together what execution has to separate, or separates what execution has to link up. That is why, when some piece of work or other presents the mind with difficulties that cannot immediately be overcome, it is impossible to combine the examination of these diffi culties with the accomplishment of the work; the mind has first of all to solve the theoretical problem by its own particular methods, and afterwards the solution can be applied to the action. You cannot say in such a case that the action is, strictly speaking, methodical; it is in accordance with method, which is a very different thing. The difference is capital; for he who applies method has no need to conceive it in his mind at the moment he is applying it. Indeed, if it is a question of something complicated, he is unable to, even should he have elaborated it himself; for the attention, always forced to concentrate itself on the actual moment of execution, cannot embrace at the same time the series of relationships on which execution as a whole depends. Hence, what is carried out is not a conception but an abstract diagram indicating a sequence of movements, and as little penetrable by the mind, at the moment of execution, as is some formula resulting from mere routine or some magic rite. Moreover, one and the same concep-

tion is applicable, with or without modifications of detail, an indefinite number of times; for although the mind embraces at one stroke the series of possible applications of a given method, man is not thereby absolved from realizing them one by one every time that it is necessary. Thus for one single flash of thought there are an unlimited number of blind actions. It goes without saying that those who go on applying indefinitely such and such a method of work have often never given themselves the trouble of understanding it; furthermore, it frequently happens that each of them is only charged with a part of the job of execution, always the same, while his companions do the rest. Hence one is brought face to face with a paradoxical situation; namely, that there is method in the motions of work, but none in the mind of the worker. It would seem as though the method had transferred its abode from the mind into the matter. Automatic machines present the most striking image of this. From the moment when the mind which has worked out a method of action has no need to take part in the job of execution, this can be handed over to pieces of metal just as well as and better than to living members; and one is thus presented with the strange spectacle of machines in which the method has become so perfectly crystallized in metal that it seems as though it is they which do the thinkng, and it is the men who serve them who are reduced to the condition of automata.

Indeed, this contrast between the application and the understanding of the method is found again, in absolutely identical form, in the realm of pure theory itself. To take a simple example, it is absolutely impossible, at the moment when one is working out a difficult division sum, to have the theory of division present to the mind; and that is so not only because this

theory, which is based on the relationship of division to multiplication, is of a certain complexity, but above all because when carrying out each of the partial operations at the end of which the division is accomplished, one forgets that the numbers represent now units, now tens, now hundreds. The signs combine together according to the laws governing the things which they signify; but, for want of being able to keep the relationship of sign to thing signified continually present to the mind, one handles them as though they combined together according to their own laws; and as a result the combinations become unintelligible, which means to say that they take place automatically. The mechanical nature of arithmetical operations is exemplified by the existence of calculating machines; but an accountant, too, is nothing else but an imperfect and unhappy calculating machine. Mathematics only progress by working in signs, by widening their significance, by creating signs of signs; thus the ordinary letters in algebra represent arbitrary quantities, or even virtual operations, as is the case with negative values; other letters stand for algebraic functions, and so on. As at each floor—if one may so express it—one inevitably loses sight of the relationship between sign and thing signified, the combinations of signs, although they remain rigorously methodical, very soon become impenetrable to the mind. No satisfactory algebraic machine exists, although several attempts have been made in this direction; but algebraic calculations are none the less more often than not as automatic as the work of an accountant. Or rather, they are more so in the sense that they are, in a way, essentially so. After working out a division, one can always ponder over it, while giving back the signs their significance, until one has understood the reason for each part of the

operation; but it is not the same thing in algebra, where the signs, as a result of being handled and combined together as such, end by displaying an efficacy which their significance does not account for. Such are, for example, the signs e and i; by handling them suitably, one can smooth out all sorts of difficulties in a marvellous manner, and in particular if they are combined in a certain way with π , one arrives at the assertion that the squaring of the circle is impossible; and yet no mind in the world can conceive what connection the quantities—if one may call them such—that these letters designate can have with the problem of the squaring of the circle. The process of calculation places the signs in relation to one another on the sheet of paper, without the objects so signified being in relation in the mind; with the result that the actual question of the significance of signs ends by no longer possessing any meaning. One thus finds oneself in the position of having solved a problem by a species of magic, without the mind having connected the data with the solution. Consequently, here again, as in the case of the automatic machine, method seems to have material objects as its sphere instead of mind; only, in this case, the material objects are not pieces of metal, but marks made on white paper. Which is why a certain scientist was able to say: "My pencil knows more than I do."

It is obvious, of course, that higher mathematics are not a pure product of automatism, and that mind and even genius have played and play a part in their elaboration; the result is an extraordinary mixture of blind operations coupled with flashes of understanding; but where the mind cannot embrace everything, it must necessarily play a subordinate role. And the more scientific progress accumulates readymade combinations of

signs, the more the mind is weighed down, made powerless to draw up an inventory of the ideas which it handles. Of course, the connection between the formulas thus worked out and the practical applications of them is often itself, too, completely impenetrable to the mind, with the result that it appears as fortuitous as the efficacy of a magic formula. In such a case work finds itself automatic, as it were, to the second power; it is not simply the execution, it is also the elaboration of the method of work which takes place outside the control of the mind. One might conceive, as an abstract limit, of a civilization in which all human activity, in the sphere of labour as in that of speculative theory, was subjected right down to matters of detail to an altogether mathematical strictness, and that without a single human being understanding anything at all about what he was doing; the idea of necessity would then be absent from everybody's mind, and in far more radical fashion than it is among primitive tribes which, our sociologists affirm, are ignorant of logic.

As opposed to this, the only mode of production absolutely free would be that in which methodical thought was in operation throughout the course of the work. The difficulties to be overcome would have to be so varied that it would never be possible to apply ready-made rules; not of course that the part played by acquired knowledge should be nil; but it is necessary that the worker should be obliged always to bear in mind the guiding principle behind the work in hand, so as to be able to apply it intelligently to ever-new sets of circumstances. The condition naturally governing such a presence of mind is that the fluidity of the body produced by habit and skill should reach a very high degree. All the ideas employed in the course

of the work must also be sufficiently luminous to be able to be called up in their entirety in the twinkling of an eye; whether the memory is capable of retaining the idea itself or simply the formula that served to enshrine it depends on a greater or lesser adaptability of mind, but even more on the more or less direct means whereby an idea has taken shape in the mind. Furthermore, it goes without saying that the degree of complexity of the difficulties to be solved must never be too great, on pain of bringing about a split between thought and action. Naturally, such an ideal can never be fully realized; one cannot avoid, in the practical affairs of life, carrying out actions which it is impossible to understand at the moment when they are being carried out, because one has to rely either on ready-made rules or else on instinct, trial and error, routine. But one can at any rate widen bit by bit the sphere of conscious work, and perhaps indefinitely so. To achieve this end it would be enough if man were no longer to aim at extending his knowledge and power indefinitely, but rather at establishing, both in his research and in his work, a certain balance between the mind and the object to which it is being applied.

But there is still another factor making for servitude; it is, in the case of each man, the existence of other men. And indeed, when we look into it more closely, it is, strictly speaking, the only factor; man alone can enslave man. Even primitive men would not be the slaves of nature if they did not people her with imaginary beings comparable to man, whose wills are, furthermore, interpreted by men. In this case, as in all the others, it is the outside world that is the source of power; but if behind the infinite forces of nature there did not lie, whether as a result of fiction or in reality, divine or human wills, nature

could break man, but she could not humiliate him. Matter can give the lie to expectations and ruin efforts, it remains none the less inert, made to be understood and handled from the outside; but the human mind can never be understood or handled from the outside. To the extent to which a man's fate is dependent on other men, his own life escapes not only out of his hands, but also out of the control of his intelligence; judgment and resolution no longer have anything to which to apply themselves; instead of contriving and acting, one has to stoop to pleading or threatening; and the soul is plunged into bottomless abysses of desire and fear, for there are no bounds to the satisfactions and sufferings that a man can receive at the hands of other men. This degrading dependence is not the characteristic of the oppressed only; it is for the same reason, though in different ways, that of both the oppressed and the powerful. As the man of power lives only by his slaves, the existence of an inexorable world escapes him almost entirely; his orders seem to him to contain within themselves some mysterious efficacy; he is never capable, strictly speaking, of willing, but is a prey to desires to which the clear perception of necessity never comes to assign any limit. Since he cannot conceive of any other mode of action than that of commanding, when he happens, as he inevitably does, to issue commands in vain, he passes all of a sudden from the feeling of absolute power to that of utter impotence, as often happens in dreams; and his fears are then all the more overwhelming in that he feels himself continually threatened by his rivals. As for the slaves, they are continually striving with material elements; only their lot does not depend on these material elements which they handle, but on masters whose whims are unaccountable and insatiable.

But it would still be a small matter to be dependent on other beings who, although strangers, are at any rate real and whom one can, if not penetrate, at least see, hear, divine by analogy with oneself. Actually, in all oppressive societies, any man, whatever his rank may be, is dependent not only on those above or below him, but above all on the very play of collective life—a blind play which alone determines the social hierarchies; and it does not matter much in this respect whether power allows its essentially collective origin to appear or else seems to reside in certain specific individuals after the manner of the dormitive virtue in opium. Now, if there is one thing in the world which is completely abstract, wholly mysterious, inaccessible to the senses and to the mind, it is the collectivity; the individual who is a member of it cannot, it would seem, reach up to or lay hold of it by any artifice, bring his weight to bear on it by the use of any lever; with respect to it he feels himself to be something infinitely small. If an individual's caprices seem arbitrary to everybody else, the shocks produced by collective life seem to be so to the second power. Thus between man and this universe which is assigned to him by destiny as the sole matter of his thoughts and actions, the relation oppression-servitude permanently sets the impenetrable screen of human arbitrariness. Why be surprised, then, if instead of ideas one encounters little but opinions, instead of action a blind agitation? One could only visualize the possibility of any progress in the true sense of the word, that is to say progress in the order of human values, if one could conceive as an ideal limit a society which armed man against the world without separating him from it.

Man is not made to be the plaything of the blind collectivities that he forms with his fellows, any more than he is made to be the plaything of a blind nature; but in order to cease being delivered over to society as passively as a drop of water is to the sea, he would have to be able both to understand and to act upon it. In all spheres, it is true, collective strength infinitely surpasses individual strength; thus you can no more easily conceive of an individual managing even a portion of the collective life than you can of a line extending itself by the addition of a point. Such, at any rate, is the appearance; but in reality there is one exception and one only, namely, the sphere of the mind. In the case of the mind, the relation is reversed; here the individual surpasses the collectivity to the same extent as something surpasses nothing, for thought only takes shape in a mind that is alone face to face with itself; collectivities do not think. It is true that mind by no means constitutes a force by itself. Archimedes was killed, so it is said, by a drunken soldier; and if he had been made to turn a millstone under the lash of a slave-overseer, he would have turned it in exactly the same manner as the most dullwitted man. To the extent to which the mind soars above the social *mêlée*, it can judge, but it cannot transform. All forms of force are material; the expression "spiritual force" is essentially contradictory; mind can only be a force to the extent to which it is materially indispensable. To express the same idea under another aspect, man has nothing essentially individual about him, nothing which is absolutely his own, apart from the faculty of thinking, and this society on which he is in close dependence every minute of his existence depends in its turn a little on him from the moment his thinking is necessary to it. For all the rest can be imposed from outside by force,

including bodily movements, but nothing in the world can compel a man to exercise his powers of thought, nor take away from him the control over his own mind. If you require a slave to think, the lash had better be put away; otherwise you will run very little chance of obtaining high-quality results. Thus, if we wish to form, in a purely theoretical way, the conception of a society in which collective life would be subject to men as individuals instead of subjecting them to itself, we must visualize a form of material existence wherein only efforts exclusively directed by a clear intelligence would take place, which would imply that each worker himself had to control, without referring to any external rule, not only the adaptation of his efforts to the piece of work to be produced, but also their co-ordination with the efforts of all the other members of the collectivity. The technique would have to be such as to make continual use of methodical thought; the analogy between the techniques employed in the various tasks would have to be sufficiently close, and technical education sufficiently widespread, to enable each worker to form a clear idea of all the specialized procedures; coordination would have to be arranged in sufficiently simple a manner to enable each one continually to have a precise knowledge of it, as concerns both co-operation between workers and exchange of products; collectivities would never be sufficiently vast to pass outside the range of a human mind; community of interests would be sufficiently patent to abolish competitive attitudes; and as each individual would be in a position to exercise control over the collective life as a whole, the latter would always be in accordance with the general will. Privileges founded upon the exchange of products, secrets of production or co-ordination of labour would automati-

cally be done away with. The function of co-ordinating would no longer imply power, since a continual check exercised by each individual would render any arbitrary decision impossible. Generally speaking, men's dependence with regard to one another would no longer imply that their fate rested in the hands of arbitrary factors, and would cease to introduce into human life any mysterious element whatever, since each would be in a position to verify the activities of all the rest by using his own reason. There is but one single and identical reason for all men; they only become estranged from and impenetrable to each other when they depart from it; thus a society in which the whole of material existence had as its necessary and sufficient condition that each individual should exercise his reason could be absolutely clearly understood by each individual mind. As for the stimulus necessary to overcome fatigue, sufferings and dangers, each would find it in the desire to win the esteem of his fellows, but even more so in himself; in the case of creative work by the mind, outward constraint, having become useless and harmful, is replaced by a sort of inward constraint; the sight of the unfinished task attracts the free man as powerfully as the over-seer's whip stimulates the slave. Such a society alone would be a society of men free, equal and brothers. Men would, it is true, be bound by collective ties, but exclusively in their capacity as men; they would never be treated by each other as things. Each would see in every workfellow another self occupying another post, and would love him in the way that the Gospel maxim enjoins. Thus we should possess, over and above liberty, a still more precious good; for if nothing is more odious than the humiliation and degradation of man by man, nothing is so beautiful or so sweet as friendship.

The above picture, considered by itself, is, if possible, still farther removed from the actual conditions of human existence than is the fi ction of a Golden Age. But, unlike that fiction, it is able to serve, by way of an ideal, as a standard for the analysis and evaluation of actual social patterns. The picture of a completely oppressive social life where every individual is subject to the operation of a blind mechanism was also purely theoretical; an analysis which situated a society with respect to these two pictures would already come much closer to reality, while still remaining very abstract. There thus emerges a new method of social analysis which is not that of Marx, although it starts, as Marx wanted, from the relationships of production; but whereas Marx, whose conception is in any case not very precise on this point, seems to have wanted to classify the modes of production in terms of output, these would be analysed in terms of the relationships between thought and action. It goes without saying that such a point of view in no way implies that humanity has evolved, in the course of history, from the least conscious to the most conscious forms of production; the idea of progress is indispensable for whoever seeks to design the future in advance, but it can only lead the mind astray when it is the past that is being studied. We must then replace it by the idea of a scale of values conceived outside time; but it is not possible, either, to arrange the various social patterns in serial order according to such a scale. What one can do is to refer to this scale such and such an aspect of social life, taken at a given period.

It is clear enough that one kind of work differs substantially from another by reason of something which has nothing to do with welfare, or leisure, or security, and yet which claims each man's devotion; a fisherman battling against wind and

waves in his little boat, although he suffers from cold, fatigue, lack of leisure and even of sleep, danger and a primitive level of existence, has a more enviable lot than the manual worker on a production-line, who is nevertheless better off as regards nearly all these matters. That is because his work resembles far more the work of a free man, despite the fact that routine and blind improvisation sometimes play a fairly large part in it. The craftsman of the Middle Ages also occupies, from this point of view, a fairly honourable position, although the "tricks of the trade" which play so large a part in all work carried out by hand are to a great extent something blind; as for the fully skilled worker, trained in modern technical methods, he perhaps resembles most closely the perfect workman.

Similar differences are found in collective action; a team of workers on a production-line under the eye of a foreman is a sorry spectacle, whereas it is a fine sight to see a handful of workmen in the building trade, checked by some difficulty, ponder the problem each for himself, make various suggestions for dealing with it, and then apply unanimously the method conceived by one of them, who may or may not have any official authority over the remainder. At such moments the image of a free community appears almost in its purity. As for the relationship between the nature of the work and the condition of the worker, that, too, is clearly apparent, as soon as one takes a look at history or at our present-day society; even the slaves of antiquity were treated with consideration when they were employed as physicians or as pedagogues. However, all these remarks are still concerned only with details. A method enabling one to reach general views concerning the various modes of

social organization in terms of the ideas of servitude and of liberty would be more valuable.

It would first of all be necessary to draw up something like a map of social life, a map indicating the spots where it is indispensable that thought should be exercised, and consequently, if one may so express it, the individual's zones of influence over society. It is possible to distinguish three ways in which thought can play a part in social life; it can formulate purely theoretical speculations, the results of which will afterwards be applied by technicians; it can be exercised in execution; it can be exercised in command and management. In all these cases, it is only a question of a partial and, as it were, maimed exercise of thought, since the mind is never able fully to embrace its object; but it is enough to ensure that those who are obliged to think when they are discharging their social function preserve the human aspect better than others. This is true not only for the oppressed, but also for all degrees of the social scale. In a society founded on oppression, it is not only the weak but also the most powerful who are bond-slaves to the blind demands of collective life, and in each case heart and mind suffer a diminution, though in different ways. If we compare two oppressive social strata such as, for example, the citizens of Athens and the Soviet bureaucracy, we find a distance between them at least as great as that between one of our skilled workmen and a Greek slave. As for the conditions under which thought plays a greater or lesser part in the exercise of power, it would be easy to tabulate them according to the degree of complexity and range of business, the general nature of the difficulties to be solved and the allocation of functions. Thus the members of an oppressive society are not only distinguished according to the

higher or lower position in the social mechanism to which they cling, but also by the more conscious or more passive character of their relationship with it, and this second distinction—the more important of the two—has no direct connection with the first. As for the influence that men charged with social functions subject to the control of their own intelligence can exercise on the society of which they form a part, that depends, of course, on the nature and importance of these functions; it would be very interesting, but also very difficult, to carry out a detailed analysis with regard to this point.

Another very important factor in the relations between social oppression and individuals arises from the more or less extensive powers of control that can be exercised over the various functions essentially concerned in co-ordinating by men who are not themselves invested with such powers; it is obvious that the more these functions cannot be controlled, the more crushing collective life becomes for the general body of individuals. Finally, one must bear in mind the nature of the ties which keep the individual in material dependence upon the society surrounding him; at times these ties are looser, at other times tighter, and considerable differences may be found at this point, according to whether a man is more or less forced, at every moment of his existence, to address himself to others in order to have the wherewithal to live, the wherewithal to produce, and to protect himself from outside danger. For example, a workman who has a large enough garden to supply himself with vegetables is more independent than those of his comrades who have to get all their food from the shopkeepers; an artisan who has his own tools is more independent than a factory worker whose hands become useless as soon as it pleases

the boss to stop him from working his machine. As for protection against danger, the individual's position in this respect depends on the method of warfare practised by the society in which he finds himself; where fighting is the monopoly of those belonging to a certain social stratum, the security of everybody else depends on these privileged persons; where the destructive power of armaments and the collective nature of warfare give the central government the monopoly of military force, that government disposes of the security of the citizens as it likes. To sum up, the least evil society is that in which the general run of men are most often obliged to think while acting, have the most opportunities for exercising control over collective life as a whole, and enjoy the greatest amount of independence. Furthermore, the necessary conditions for diminishing the oppressive weight of the social mechanism run counter to each other as soon as certain limits are overstepped; thus the thing to do is not to proceed forward as far as possible in a specific direction, but, what is much more difficult, to discover a certain optimum balance.

The purely negative idea of a lessening of social oppression cannot by itself provide an objective for people of good will. It is indispensable to form at any rate a vague mental picture of the sort of civilization one wishes humanity to reach; and it matters little if this mental picture is derived more from mere reverie than from real thought. If the foregoing analyses are correct, the most fully human civilization would be that which had manual labour as its pivot, that in which manual labour constituted the supreme value. It is not a question of anything comparable to the religion of production which reigned in America during the period of prosperity, and has

reigned in Russia since the Five Year Plan; for the true object of that religion is the product of work and not the worker, material objects and not man. It is not in relation to what it produces that manual labour must become the highest value, but in relation to the man who performs it; it must not be made the object of honours and rewards, but must constitute for each human being what he is most essentially in need of if his life is to take on of itself a meaning and a value in his own eyes. Even in these days, so-called disinterested activities, such as sport or even art or even thought, do not succeed in giving perhaps the equivalent of what one experiences in getting directly to grips with the world by means of non-mechanized labour. Rimbaud complained that "we are not in the world" and that "true life is absent"; in those moments of incomparable joy and fullness we know by flashes that true life is there at hand, we feel with all our being that the world exists and that we are in the world. Even physical fatigue cannot lessen the strength of this feeling, but rather, as long as it is not excessive, augments it. If this can be so in our day, what wonderful fullness of life could we not expect from a civilization in which labour would be sufficiently transformed to exercise fully all the faculties, to form the human act par excellence? It would then of necessity be at the very centre of culture. At one time culture was considered by many as an end in itself, and in our days those who see more in it than just a hobby usually look to it as a means of escape from real life. Its true value should consist, on the contrary, in preparing for real life, in equipping man so that he may maintain, both with this universe which is his portion and with his fellows whose condition is identical to his own, relations worthy of the greatness of humanity. Science is today regarded by some

as a mere catalogue of technical recipes, by others as a body of pure intellectual speculations which are sufficient unto themselves; the former set too little value on the intellect, the latter on the world. Thought is certainly man's supreme dignity; but it is exercised in a vacuum, and consequently only in appearance, when it does not seize hold of its object, which can be none other than the universe. Now what gives the abstract speculations of the scientists that connection with the universe which alone can invest them with a concrete value, is the fact that they are directly or indirectly applicable. In our days, it is true, their own applications remain unknown to them; while those who elaborate or study those speculations do so without considering their theoretical value. At least that is more often than not the case. On the day when it became impossible to understand scientific notions, even the most abstract, without clearly perceiving at the same time their connection with possible applications, and equally impossible to apply such notions even indirectly without thoroughly knowing and understanding them—on that day science would have become concrete and labour would have become conscious; and then only will each possess its full value.

Until that time comes, there will always be something incomplete and inhuman about science and labour. Those who have so far maintained that applications are the goal of science meant to say that truth is not worth seeking and that success alone counts; but it could be understood differently; one can conceive of a science whose ultimate aim would be the perfecting of technique not by rendering it more powerful, but simply more conscious and more methodical. Besides, output might well increase in proportion with clear thinking; "seek ye first

the kingdom of God . . . and all these things shall be added unto you". Such a science would be, in effect, a method for mastering nature, or a catalogue of concepts indispensable for attaining to such mastery, arranged according to an order that would make them palpably clear to the mind. Presumably Descartes conceived science after this fashion. As for the art of such a civilization, it would crystallize in its works the expression of that happy balance between mind and body, between man and the universe, which can exist in action only in the noblest forms of physical labour; moreover, even in the past, the purest works of art have always expressed the sentiment, or, to speak perhaps with greater precision, the presentiment of such a balance. The essential aim of sport would be to give the human body that suppleness and, as Hegel says, that fluidity which renders it pervious to thought and enables the latter to enter directly into contact with material objects. Social relations would be directly modelled upon the organization of labour; men would group themselves in small working collectivities, where co-operation would be the sovereign law, and where each would be able to understand clearly and to verify the connection between the rules to which his life was subjected and the public interest. Moreover, every moment of existence would afford each the opportunity to understand and to feel how profoundly all men are one, since they all have to bring one same reason to bear on similar obstacles; and all human relations, from the most superficial to the very tenderest, would have about them something of that manly and brotherly feeling which forms the bond between workmates.

No doubt all this is purely utopian. But to give even a summary description of a state of things which would be better

than what actually exists is always to build a utopia; yet nothing is more necessary to our life than such descriptions, provided it is always reason that is responsible for them. The whole of modern thought since the Renaissance is, moreover, impregnated with more or less vague aspirations towards such a utopian civilization; for some time it was even thought that this civilization was beginning to take shape, and that men were entering upon a period when Greek geometry would descend upon earth. Descartes certainly believed this, as also did some of his contemporaries. Furthermore, the idea of labour considered as a human value is doubtless the one and only spiritual conquest achieved by the human mind since the miracle of Greece; this was perhaps the only gap in the ideal of human life elaborated by Greece and left behind by her as an undying heritage. Bacon was the first to put forward this idea. For the ancient and heart-breaking curse contained in Genesis, which made the world appear as a convict prison and labour as the sign of men's servitude and abasement, he substituted in a flash of genius the veritable charter expressing the relations between man and the world: "We cannot command Nature except by obeying her." This simple pronouncement ought to form by itself the Bible of our times. It suffices to define true labour, the kind which forms free men, and that to the very extent to which it is an act of conscious submission to necessity. After Descartes, scientists progressively slipped into considering pure science as an end in itself; but the ideal of a life devoted to some free form of physical labour began, on the other hand, to be perceived by writers; and it even dominates the masterpiece of the poet usually regarded as the most aristocratic of all, namely, Goethe. Faust, a symbol of the human soul in its untiring pursuit of the good, abandons with disgust the abstract search for

truth, which has become in his eyes an empty and barren occupation; love merely leads him to destroy the loved one; political and military power reveals itself as nothing but a game of appearances; the meeting with beauty fulfils his dreams, but only for the space of a second; his position as industrial leader gives him a power which he believes to be substantial, but which nevertheless delivers him up to the tyranny of the passions. Finally, he longs to be stripped of his magic power, which can be regarded as the symbol of all forms of power, and he exclaims: "If I could stand before thee, Nature, simply as a man, then it would be worth while being a human creature"; and he ends by having, at the moment of death, a foretaste of the most complete happiness, by representing to himself a life spent freely among a free people and entirely taken up by hard and dangerous physical labour, which would, however, be carried out in the midst of brotherly co-operation. It would be easy to cite yet other famous names, amongst them Rousseau, Shelley and, above all, Tolstoy, who developed this theme throughout the whole of his work in matchless accents. As for the working-class movement, every time it has managed to escape from demagogy, it is on the dignity of labour that it has based the workers' demands. Proudhon dared to write: "The genius of the humblest artisan is as much superior to the materials with which he works as is the mind of a Newton to the lifeless spheres whose distances, masses and revolutions he calculates." Marx, whose work contains a good many contradictions, set down as man's essential characteristic, as opposed to the animals, the fact that he produces the conditions of his own existence and thus himself indirectly produces himself. The revolutionary syndicalists, who place at the core of the social problem the dignity of the producer as such, are linked up with

the same current of ideas. On the whole, we may feel proud to belong to a civilization which has brought with it the presage of a new ideal.

Sketch of contemporary social life

It is impossible to imagine anything more contrary to this ideal than the form which modern civilization has assumed in our day, at the end of a development lasting several centuries. Never has the individual been so completely delivered up to a blind collectivity, and never have men been less capable, not only of subordinating their actions to their thoughts, but even of thinking. Such terms as oppressors and oppressed, the idea of classes—all that sort of thing is near to losing all meaning, so obvious are the impotence and distress of all men in face of the social machine, which has become a machine for breaking hearts and crushing spirits, a machine for manufacturing irresponsibility, stupidity, corruption, slackness and, above all, dizziness. The reason for this painful state of affairs is perfectly clear. We are living in a world in which nothing is made to man's measure; there exists a monstrous discrepancy between man's body, man's mind and the things which at the present time constitute the elements of human existence; everything is disequilibrium. There is not a single category, group or class of men that is altogether exempt from this destructive disequilibrium, except perhaps for a few isolated patches of more primitive life; and the younger generation, who have grown and are growing up in it, inwardly reflect the chaos surrounding them more than do their elders. This disequilibrium is essentially a matter of quantity. Quantity is changed into quality, as Hegel said, and in particular a mere difference in quantity is sufficient

to change what is human into what is inhuman. From the abstract point of view quantities are immaterial, since you can arbitrarily change the unit of measurement; but from the concrete point of view certain units of measurement are given and have hitherto remained invariable, such as the human body, human life, the year, the day, the average quickness of human thought. Present-day life is not organized on the scale of all these things; it has been transported into an altogether different order of magnitude, as though man were trying to raise it to the level of the forces of outside nature while neglecting to take his own nature into account. If we add that, to all appearances, the economic system has exhausted its constructive capacity and is beginning to be able to function only by undermining little by little its own material foundations, we shall perceive in all its simplicity the veritable essence of the bottomless misery that forms the lot of the present generations.

In appearance, nearly everything nowadays is carried out methodically; science is king, machinery invades bit by bit the entire field of labour, statistics take on a growing importance, and over one-sixth of the globe the central authority is trying to regulate the whole of social life according to plans. But in reality methodical thought is progressively disappearing, owing to the fact that the mind finds less and less matter on which to bite. Mathematics by itself forms too vast and too complex a whole to be embraced by one mind; a fortiori the whole formed by mathematics and the natural sciences; a fortiori the whole formed by science and its applications; and, on the other hand, everything is too intimately connected for the mind to be able really to grasp partial concepts. Now everything that the individual becomes powerless to control is seized upon by the col-

lectivity. Thus science has now been for a long time—and to an ever-increasing extent—a collective enterprise. Actually, new results are always, in fact, the work of specific individuals; but, save perhaps for rare exceptions, the value of any result depends on such a complex set of interrelations with past discoveries and possible future researches that even the mind of the inventor cannot embrace the whole. Consequently, new discoveries, as they go on accumulating, take on the appearance of enigmas, after the style of too thick a glass which ceases to be transparent. A fortiori practical life takes on a more and more collective character, and the individual as such a more and more insignificant place in it. Technical progress and mass production reduce manual workers more and more to a passive role; in increasing proportion and to an ever greater extent they arrive at a form of labour that enables them to carry out the necessary movements without understanding their connection with the final result. On the other hand, an industrial concern has become something too vast and too complex for any one man to be able to grasp it fully; and furthermore, in all spheres, the men who occupy key posts in social life are in charge of matters which are far beyond the compass of any single human mind. As for the general body of social life, it depends on so many factors, each of which is impenetrably obscure and which are tangled up in inextricable relations with one another, that it would never even occur to anyone to try to understand its mechanism. Thus the social function most essentially connected with the individual, that which consists in co-ordinating, managing, deciding, is beyond any individual's capacity and becomes to a certain extent collective and, as it were, anonymous.

To the very extent to which what is systematic in contemporary life escapes the control of the mind, its regularity is established by things which constitute the equivalent of what collective thought would be if the collectivity did think. The cohesiveness of science is ensured by means of signs; namely, on the one hand, by words or ready-made phrases whose use is stretched beyond the meanings originally contained in them, on the other hand, by algebraic calculations. In the sphere of labour, the things which take upon themselves the essential functions are machines. The thing which relates production to consumption and governs the exchange of products is money. Finally, where the function of co-ordination and management is too heavy for the mind and intelligence of one man, it is entrusted to a curious machine, whose parts are men, whose gears consist of regulations, reports and statistics, and which is called bureaucratic organization. All these blind things imitate the effort of thought to the life. Just the mechanism of algebraic calculation has led more than once to what might be called a new idea, except that the content of such pseudo-ideas is no more than that of relations between signs; and algebra is often marvellously apt to transform a series of experimental results into laws, with a disconcerting ease reminding one of the fantastic transformations one sees in motion-picture cartoons. Automatic machines seem to offer the model for the intelligent, faithful, docile and conscientious worker. As for money, economists have long been convinced that it possesses the virtue of establishing harmonious relations between the various economic functions. And bureaucratic machines almost reach the point of taking the place of leaders. Thus, in all spheres, thought, the prerogative of the individual, is subordinated to

vast mechanisms which crystallize collective life, and that is so to such an extent that we have almost lost the notion of what real thought is. The efforts, the labours, the inventions of beings of flesh and blood whom time introduces in successive waves to social life only possess social value and effectiveness on condition that they become in their turn crystallized in these huge mechanisms. The inversion of the relation between means and ends — an inversion which is to a certain extent the law of every oppressive society — here becomes total or nearly so, and extends to nearly everything. The scientist does not use science in order to manage to see more clearly into his own thinking, but aims at discovering results that will go to swell the present volume of scientific knowledge. Machines do not run in order to enable men to live, but we resign ourselves to feeding men in order that they may serve the machines. Money does not provide a convenient method for exchanging products; it is the sale of goods which is a means for keeping money in circulation. Lastly, organization is not a means for exercising a collective activity, but the activity of a group, whatever it may be, is a means for strengthening organization. Another aspect of the same inversion consists in the fact that signs, words and algebraic formulas in the field of knowledge, money and credit symbols in economic life, play the part of realities of which the actual things themselves constitute only the shadows, exactly as in Hans Andersen's tale in which the scientist and his shadow exchanged roles; this is because signs constitute the material of social relations, whereas the perception of reality is something individual. The dispossession of the individual in favour of the collectivity is not, indeed, absolute, and it cannot become so; but it is hard to imagine how it could go much farther than at

present. The power and concentration of armaments place all human lives at the mercy of the central authority. As a result of the vast extension of exchange, the majority of men cannot procure for themselves the greater part of what they consume save through the medium of society and in return for money; the peasants themselves are today to a large extent under this obligation to buy. And as big industry is a system of collective production, a great many men are forced, in order that their hands may come into contact with the material of work, to go through a collectivity which swallows them up and pins them down to a more or less servile task; when it rejects them, the strength and skill of their hands remain useless. The very peasants, who hitherto had managed to escape this wretched condition, have been reduced to it of late over one-sixth of the globe. Such a stifling state of affairs certainly provokes here and there an individualistic reaction; art, and especially literature, bears the marks of it; but since, owing to objective conditions, this reaction cannot impinge on either the sphere of thought or that of action, it remains bottled up in the play of the inner consciousness or in dreams of adventure and gratuitous acts, in other words, it never leaves the realm of shadows; and everything leads one to suppose that even this shadowy reaction is doomed to disappear almost completely.

When man reaches this degree of enslavement, judgments of value can only be based, whatever the particular field may be, on a purely external criterion; language does not possess any term so foreign to thought as properly to express something so devoid of meaning; but we may say that this criterion is constituted by efficiency, provided we thereby understand successes obtained in a vacuum. Even a scientific concept is not valued

according to its content, which may be completely unintelligible, but according to the opportunities it provides for coordinating, abbreviating, summarizing. In the economic field, an undertaking is judged, not according to the real utility of the social functions it fulfils, but according to its growth so far and the speed with which it is developing; and the same is true of everything. Thus judgment of values is as it were entrusted to material objects instead of to the mind. The efficacy of efforts of whatever kind must always, it is true, be verified by thought, for, generally speaking, all verification proceeds from the mind; but thought has been reduced to such a subordinate role that one may say, by way of simplification, that the function of verification has passed from thought to things. But this excessive complication of all theoretical and practical activities which has thus dethroned thought, finally, when still further aggravated, comes to render the verification exercised by things in its turn imperfect and almost impossible. Everything is then blind. Thus it is that, in the sphere of science, the excessive accumulation of materials of every kind produces such chaos that the time seems to be approaching when any system will appear arbitrary. The chaos existing in economic life is still far more patent. In the actual carrying out of work, the subordination of irresponsible slaves to leaders overwhelmed by the mass of things to attend to, and, incidentally, themselves to a large extent irresponsible, is the cause of faulty workmanship and countless acts of negligence; this evil, which was first of all restricted to the big industrial undertakings, has now spread to the countryside wherever the peasants are enslaved after the manner of the industrial workers, that is to say, in Soviet Russia. The tremendous extension of credit prevents money from

playing its regulating role so far as concerns commercial exchanges and the relationships between the various branches of production; and it would be useless to try to remedy this by doses of statistics. The parallel extension of speculation ends up by rendering the prosperity of industries independent, to a large extent, of their good functioning; the reason being that the capital increase brought about by the actual production of each of them counts less and less as compared with the constant supply of fresh capital. In short, in all spheres, success has become something almost arbitrary; it seems more and more to be the work of pure chance; and as it constituted the sole rule in all branches of human activity, our civilization is invaded by an ever-increasing disorder, and ruined by a waste in proportion to that disorder. This transformation is taking place at the very moment when the sources of profit on which the capitalist economy formerly drew for its prodigious development are becoming less and less plentiful, and when the technical conditions of work are themselves imposing a rapidly decreasing tempo on the improvement of industrial equipment.

So many profound changes have been taking place almost unbeknownst to us, and yet we are living in a period when the very axis of the social system is as it were in process of heeling over. Throughout the rise of the industrial system social life found itself oriented in the direction of construction. The industrial equipment of the planet was the supreme battleground on which the struggle for power was waged. To increase the size of an undertaking faster than its competitors, and that by means of its own resources—such was, broadly speaking, the aim and object of economic activity. Saving was the rule of economic life; consumption was restricted as much

as possible, not only that of the workers, but also that of the capitalists themselves, and, in general, all expenditure connected with other things than industrial equipment. The supreme mission of governments was to preserve peace at home and abroad. The bourgeoisie were under the impression that this state of things would go on indefinitely, for the greater happiness of humanity; but it could not go on indefinitely in this way. Nowadays, the struggle for power, while preserving to a certain extent the same outward appearance, has entirely changed in character. The formidable increase in the part capital plant plays in undertakings, if compared with that of living labour, the rapid decrease in the rate of profit which has resulted, the ever-increasing amount of overhead expenses, waste, leakage, the lack of any regulating device for adjusting the various branches of production to one another—everything prevents social activity from still having as its pivot the development of the undertaking by turning profits into capital. It seems as though the economic struggle has ceased to be a form of competition in order to become a sort of war. It is no longer so much a question of properly organizing the work as of squeezing out the greatest possible amount of available capital scattered about in society by marketing shares, and then of squeezing out the greatest possible amount of money from everywhere by marketing products; everything takes place in the realm of opinion, and almost of fiction, by means of speculation and publicity. Since credit is the key to all economic success, saving is replaced by the maddest forms of expenditure. The term property has almost ceased to have any meaning; the ambitious man no longer thinks of being owner of a business and running it at a profit, but of causing the widest possible

sector of economic activity to pass under his control. In a word, if we attempt to characterize, albeit in vague and summary fashion, this almost impenetrably obscure transformation, it is now a question in the struggle for economic power far less of building up than of conquering; and since conquest is destructive, the capitalist system, though remaining outwardly pretty much the same as it was fifty years ago, is wholly turned towards destruction. The means employed in the economic struggle—publicity, lavish display of wealth, corruption, enormous capital investments based almost entirely on credit, marketing of useless products by almost violent methods, speculations with the object of ruining rival concerns—all these tend to undermine the foundations of our economic life far more than to broaden them.

But all that is little enough compared with two related phenomena which are beginning to appear clearly and to cause a tragic threat to weigh upon the life of everyone; namely, on the one hand, the fact that the State tends more and more, and with an extraordinary rapidity, to become the centre of economic and social life, and, on the other hand, the subordination of economic to military interests. If one tries to analyse these phenomena in detail, one is held up by an almost inextricable web of reciprocal causes and effects; but the general trend is clear enough. It is quite natural that the increasingly bureaucratic nature of economic activity should favour the development of the power of the State, which is the bureaucratic organization par excellence. The profound change in the economic struggle operates in the same direction; the State is incapable of constructing, but owing to the fact that it concentrates in its hands the most powerful means of coercion, it is brought, as it were, by its very weight

gradually to become the central element when it comes to conquering and destroying. Finally, seeing that the extraordinary complication of exchange and credit operations prevents money henceforth from sufficing to co-ordinate economic life, a semblance of bureaucratic co-ordination has to make up for it; and the central bureaucratic organization, which is the State machine, must naturally be led sooner or later to take the main hand in this co-ordination. The pivot around which revolves social life, thus transformed, is none other than preparation for war. Seeing that the struggle for power is carried out by conquest and destruction, in other words by a diffused economic war, it is not surprising that actual war should come to occupy the foreground. And since war is the recognized form of the struggle for power when the competitors are States, every increase in the State's grip on economic life has the effect of orienting industrial life yet a little farther towards preparation for war; while, conversely, the ever-increasing demands occasioned by preparation for war help day by day to bring the all-round economic and social activities of each country more and more into subjection to the authority of the central power. It seems fairly clear that contemporary humanity tends pretty well everywhere towards a totalitarian form of social organization—to use the term which the national-socialists have made fashionable—that is to say, towards a system in which the State power comes to exercise sovereign sway in all spheres, even, indeed above all, in that of thought. Russia presents us with an almost perfect example of such a system, for the greater misfortune of the Russian people; other countries will only be able to approach it, short of upheavals similar to that of October 1917; but it seems inevitable that all of them will approach it more or less in the course of the coming

years. This development will only give disorder a bureaucratic form, and still further increase confusion, waste and misery. Wars will bring in their train a frantic consumption of raw materials and capital equipment, a crazy destruction of wealth of all kinds that previous generations have bequeathed us. When chaos and destruction have reached the limit beyond which the very functioning of the economic and social organization becomes materially impossible, our civilization will perish; and humanity, having gone back to a more or less primitive level of existence and to a social life dispersed into much smaller collectivities, will set out again along a new road which it is quite impossible for us to predict.

To imagine that we can switch the course of history along a different track by transforming the system through reforms or revolutions, to hope to find salvation in a defensive or offensive action against tyranny and militarism—all that is just daydreaming. There is nothing on which to base even attempts. Marx's assertion that the régime would produce its own gravediggers is cruelly contradicted every day; and one wonders, incidentally, how Marx could ever have believed that slavery could produce free men. Never yet in history has a régime of slavery fallen under the blows of the slaves. The truth is that, to quote a famous saying, slavery degrades man to the point of making him love it; that liberty is precious only in the eyes of those who effectively possess it; and that a completely inhuman system, as ours is, far from producing beings capable of building up a human society, models all those subjected to it—oppressed and oppressors alike—according to its own image. Everywhere, in varying degrees, the impossibility of relating what one gives to what one receives has killed the feeling for

sound workmanship, the sense of responsibility, and has developed passivity, neglect, the habit of expecting everything from outside, the belief in miracles. Even in the country, the feeling of a deep-seated bond between the land which sustains the man and the man who works the land has to a large extent been obliterated since the taste for speculation, the unpredictable rises and falls in currencies and prices have got countryfolk into the habit of turning their eyes towards the towns. The worker has not the feeling of earning his living as a producer; it is merely that the undertaking keeps him enslaved for long hours every day and allows him each week a sum of money which gives him the magic power of conjuring up at a moment's notice ready-made products, exactly as the rich do. The presence of innumerable unemployed, the cruel necessity of having to beg for a job, make wages appear less as wages than as alms. As for the unemployed themselves, the fact that they are involuntary parasites, and poverty-stricken into the bargain, does not make them any the less parasites. Generally speaking, the relation between work done and money earned is so hard to grasp that it appears as almost accidental, so that labour takes on the aspect of servitude, money that of a favour. The so-called governing classes are affected by the same passivity as all the others, owing to the fact that, snowed under as they are by an avalanche of inextricable problems, they long since gave up governing. One would look in vain, from the highest down to the lowest rungs of the social ladder, for a class of men among whom the idea could one day spring up that they might, in certain circumstances, have to take in hand the destinies of society; the harangues of the fascists could alone give the illusion of this, but they are empty.

As always happens, mental confusion and passivity leave free scope to the imagination On all hands one is obsessed by a representation of social life which, while differing considerably from one class to another, is always made up of mysteries, occult qualities, myths, idols and monsters; each one thinks that power resides mysteriously in one of the classes to which he has no access, because hardly anybody understands that it resides nowhere, so that the dominant feeling everywhere is that dizzy fear which is always brought about by loss of contact with reality. Each class appears from the outside as a nightmare object. In circles connected with the working-class movement, dreams are haunted by mythological monsters called Finance, Industry, Stock Exchange, Bank, etc.; the bourgeois dream about other monsters which they call ringleaders, agitators, demagogues; the politicians regard the capitalists as supernatural beings who alone possess the key to the situation, and vice versa; each nation regards its neighbours as collective monsters inspired by a diabolical perversity. One could go on developing this theme indefinitely. In such a situation, any log whatever can be looked upon as king and take the place of one up to a certain point thanks to that belief alone; and this is true, not merely in the case of men in general, but also in that of the governing classes. Nothing is easier, for that matter, than to spread any myth whatsoever throughout a whole population. We must not be surprised, therefore, at the appearance of "totalitarian" régimes unprecedented in history. It is often said that force is powerless to overcome thought; but for this to be true, there must be thought. Where irrational opinions hold the place of ideas, force is all-powerful. It is quite unfair to say, for example, that fascism annihilates free thought; in reality it is the lack of free

thought which makes it possible to impose by force official doctrines entirely devoid of meaning. Actually, such a régime even manages considerably to increase the general stupidity, and there is little hope for the generations that will have grown up under the conditions which it creates. Nowadays, every attempt to turn men into brutes finds powerful means at its disposal. On the other hand, one thing is impossible, even were you to dispose of the best of public platforms, and that is to diffuse clear ideas, correct reasoning and sensible views on any wide scale.

It is no good expecting help to come from men; and even were it otherwise, men would none the less be vanquished in advance by the natural power of things. The present social system provides no means of action other than machines for crushing humanity; whatever may be the intentions of those who use them, these machines crush and will continue to crush as long as they exist. With the industrial convict prisons constituted by the big factories, one can only produce slaves and not free workers, still less workers who would form a dominant class. With guns, aeroplanes, bombs, you can spread death, terror, oppression, but not life and liberty. With gas masks, air-raid shelters and air-raid warnings, you can create wretched masses of panicstricken human beings, ready to succumb to the most senseless forms of terror and to welcome with gratitude the most humiliating forms of tyranny, but not citizens. With the popular press and the wireless, you can make a whole people swallow with their breakfast or their supper a series of ready-made and, by the same token, absurd opinions—for even sensible views become deformed and falsified in minds which accept them unthinkingly; but you cannot with the aid of these things arouse so much as a gleam of

thought. And without factories, without arms, without the popular press you can do nothing against those who possess all these things. The same applies to everything. The powerful means are oppressive, the non-powerful means remain inoperative. Each time that the oppressed have tried to set up groups able to exercise a real influence, such groups, whether they went by the name of parties or unions, have reproduced in full within themselves all the vices of the system which they claimed to reform or abolish, namely, bureaucratic organization, reversal of the relationship between means and ends, contempt for the individual, separation between thought and action, the mechanization of thought itself, the exploitation of stupidity and lies as means of propaganda, and so on.

The only possibility of salvation would lie in a methodical cooperation between all, strong and weak, with a view to accomplishing a progressive decentralization of social life; but the absurdity of such an idea strikes one immediately. Such a form of co-operation is impossible to imagine, even in dreams, in a civilization that is based on competition, on struggle, on war. Apart from some such co-operation, there is no means of stopping the blind trend of the social machine towards an increasing centralization, until the machine itself suddenly jams and flies into pieces. What weight can the hopes and desires of those who are not at the control levers carry, when, reduced to the most tragic impotence, they find themselves the mere playthings of blind and brutish forces As for those who exercise economic or political authority, harried as they are incessantly by rival ambitions and hostile powers, they cannot work to weaken their own authority without condemning themselves almost certainly to being deprived of it. The more they feel

themselves to be animated by good intentions, the more they will be brought, even despite themselves, to endeavour to extend their authority in order to increase their ability to do good; which amounts to oppressing people in the hope of liberating them, as Lenin did. It is quite patently impossible for decentralization to be initiated by the central authority; to the very extent to which the central authority is exercised, it brings everything else under its subjection. Generally speaking, the idea of enlightened despotism, which has always had a utopian flavour about it, is in our day completely absurd. Faced with problems whose variety and complexity are infinitely beyond the range of great as of limited minds, no despot in the world can possibly be enlightened. Though a few men may hope, by dint of honest and methodical thinking, to perceive a few gleams in this impenetrable darkness, those whom the cares and responsibilities of authority deprive of both leisure and liberty of mind are certainly not of that number.

In such a situation, what can those do who still persist, against all eventualities, in honouring human dignity both in themselves and in others? Nothing, except endeavour to introduce a little play into the cogs of the machine that is grinding us down; seize every opportunity of awakening a little thought wherever they are able; encourage whatever is capable, in the sphere of politics, economics or technique, of leaving the individual here and there a certain freedom of movement amid the trammels cast around him by the social organization. That is certainly something, but it does not go very far. On the whole, our present situation more or less resembles that of a party of absolutely ignorant travellers who find themselves in a motorcar launched at full speed and driverless across broken country.

When will the smash-up occur after which it will be possible to consider trying to construct something new? Perhaps it is a matter of a few decades, perhaps of centuries. There are no data enabling one to fix a probable lapse of time. It seems, however, that the material resources of our civilization are not likely to become exhausted for some considerable time, even allowing for wars; and, on the other hand, as centralization, by abolishing all individual initiative and all local life, destroys by its very existence everything which might serve as a basis for a different form of organization, one may suppose that the present system will go on existing up to the extreme limit of possibility. To sum up, it seems reasonable to suppose that the generations which will have to face the difficulties brought about by the collapse of the present system have yet to be born. As for the generations now living, they are perhaps, of all those that have followed each other in the course of human history, the ones which will have had to shoulder the maximum of imaginary responsibilities and the minimum of real ones. Once this situation is fully realized, it leaves a marvellous freedom of mind.

Conclusion

What exactly will perish and what subsist of our present civilization? What are the conditions and what is the direction in which history will afterwards unfold itself? These questions are insoluble. What we know in advance is that life will be proportionately less inhuman according as the individual ability to think and act is greater. Our present civilization, of which our descendents will no doubt inherit some fragments, at any rate contains, we feel it only too keenly, the wherewithal to crush man; but it also contains, at least in germ, the wherewithal to liberate him. Our science includes, despite all the obscurities engendered by a sort of new scholasticism, some admirable flashes of genius, some parts that are clear and luminous, some perfectly methodical steps undertaken by the mind. In our technique also the germs of a liberation of labour can be found: probably not, as is commonly thought, in the direction of automatic machines; these certainly appear to be suitable, from the purely technical point of view, for relieving men of the mechanical and unconscious element contained in labour, but, on the other hand, they are indissolubly bound up with an excessively centralized and consequently very oppressive economic organization. But other forms of the machine-tool have produced—above all before the war—perhaps the finest type of conscious worker history has ever seen, namely, the skilled workman. If, in the course of the last twenty years, the machine-tool has become more and more automatic in its functioning, if the work carried

out, even on machines of relatively ancient design, has become more and more mechanical, the reason lies in the ever-increasing concentration of the economy. Who knows whether an industry split up into innumerable small undertakings would not bring about an inverse development of the machinetool, and, at the same time, types of work calling for a yet greater consciousness and ingenuity than the most highly skilled work in modern factories? We are all the more justified in entertaining such hopes in that electricity supplies the form of energy suitable for such a type of industrial organization.

Given that once we have fully realized our almost complete powerlessness in regard to present-day ills we are at any rate relieved of the duty of concerning ourselves with the present state of things, apart from those moments when we feel its direct impact, what nobler task could we assume than that of preparing for such a future in a methodical way by devoting ourselves to drawing up an inventory of modern civilization? It is certainly a task which goes far beyond the narrow possibilities of a single human life; on the other hand, to pursue such a course is to condemn oneself of a certainty to moral loneliness, to lack of understanding, to the hostility of the enemies as well as of the servants of the existing order. As for future generations, nothing entitles us to assume that, across the upheavals which separate us from them, chance may allow the fragmentary ideas that might be elaborated by a few solitary minds in our day even to reach them. But it would be folly to complain of such a situation. No pact with Providence has ever guaranteed the effectiveness of even the most nobly-inspired efforts. And when one has resolved to place confidence, within and around oneself solely in efforts whose source and origin lie in the mind

of the very person who accomplishes them, it would be foolish to wish that some magical operation should enable great results to be obtained with the insignificant forces placed at the disposal of isolated individuals. It is never by such arguments that a staunch mind can allow itself to be deflected, once it has clearly perceived that there is one thing to be done, and one only.

It would thus seem to be a question of separating, in present-day civilization, what belongs of right to man, considered as an individual, and what is of a nature to place weapons in the hands of the collectivity for use against him, whilst at the same time trying to discover the means whereby the former elements may be developed at the expense of the latter. As far as science is concerned, we must no longer seek to add to the already over-great mass which it forms; we must draw up its balance-sheet, so as to enable the mind to place in evidence there what is properly its own, what is made up of clear concepts, and to set aside what is only an automatic procedure for co-ordinating, unifying, summarizing or even discovering; we must try to reduce these procedures themselves to conscious steps on the part of the mind; we must, generally speaking, wherever possible, conceive of and present scientific results as merely a phase in the methodical activity of the mind. For this purpose, a serious study of the history of the sciences is probably indispensable. As for technique, it ought to be studied in a thoroughgoing manner—its history, present state, possibilities of development—and that from an entirely new point of view, which would no longer be that of output, but that of the relation between the worker and his work. Lastly, the analogy between the steps accomplished by the human mind, on the one

hand in daily life and particularly in work, on the other hand in the methodical development of science, should be fully brought out. Even if a sequence of mental efforts oriented in this sense were to remain without influence on the future evolution of social organization, it would not lose its value on that account; the future destinies of humanity are not the sole object worthy of consideration. Only fanatics are able to set no value on their own existence save to the extent that it serves a collective cause; to react against the subordination of the individual to the collectivity implies that one begins by refusing to subordinate one's own destiny to the course of history. In order to resolve upon undertaking such an effort of critical analysis, all one needs is to realize that it would enable him who did so to escape the contagion of folly and collective frenzy by reaffirming on his own account, over the head of the social idol, the original pact between the mind and the universe.

Simone Weil, 1934.

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Simone Weil

French philosopher

Paris (France), 3 February 1909
Ashford (England), 24 August 1943

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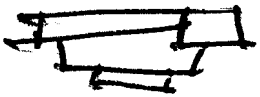

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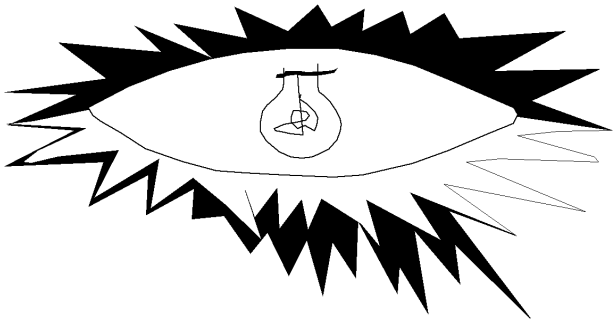

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